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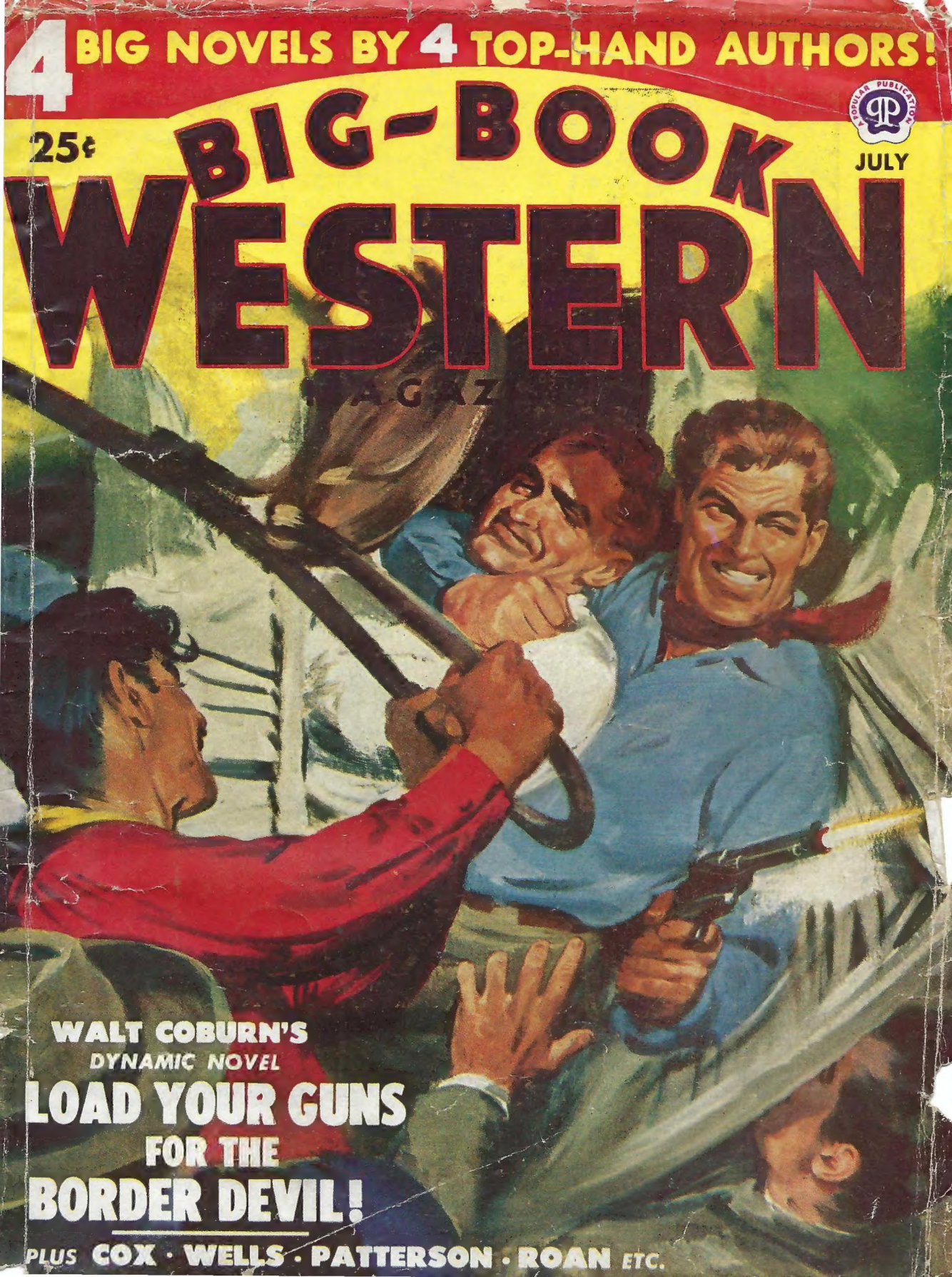

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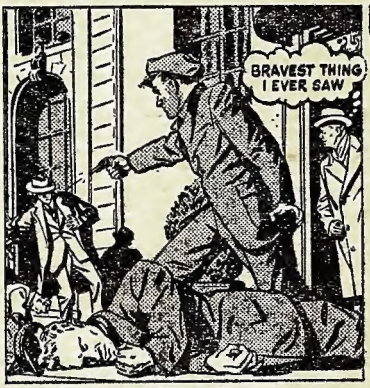

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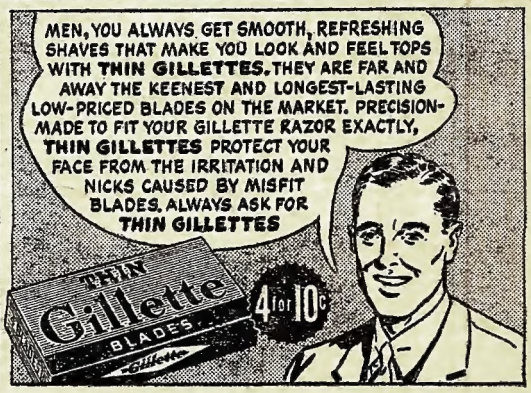

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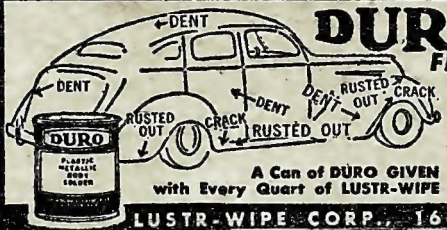

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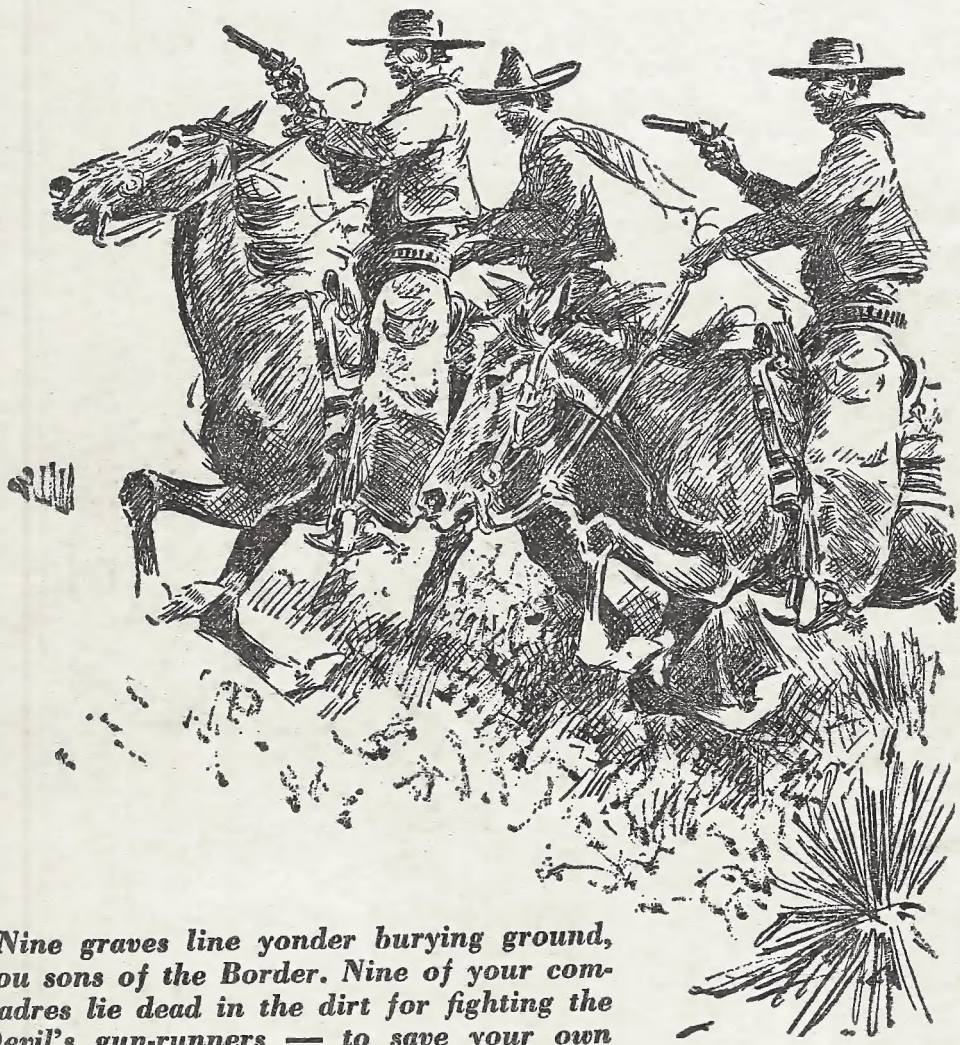
Exciting Novel of Border Violence

By WALT COBURN



"Nine graves line yonder burying ground, you sons of the Border. Nine of your compadres lie dead in the dirt for fighting the Devil's gun-runners — to save your own damned hides! And you, you hell-almighty desert fighters! Are your guts made of blood and sand—or rotten eggs? Are you with me —win or lose, live or die? We'll do both! Tonight we ride—for honor, for hell, for hallelujah! Mount up, you sons of glory!

Andale! *We go!"*

THE BORDER DEVIL!

"Come on, you sons of the Border! Let's get goin'!"

Chapter I

—DOWN MASSACRE WAY!

JIM TANDY had the Wineglass roundup camped at Cochise Tanks just north of the Border when Cousin Ted showed up with the bad news that a revolution had torn hell loose from its hinges down in Sonora. The Old Man wanted to see Tandy right now.

"Uncle Sam is fit to be tied." Cousin Ted had that damned smug self-satisfied

grin on his handsome face. "Now that it's too late, he's cussing you out for not working the lower range first. He's wondering why you delayed getting our cattle up out of Sonora before the rebels moved in.

"You're supposed to be hand in glove with the greasers and able to smell a revolution. We've got a ninety-nine year lease on the Santa Maria Grant down there and its million cattle acres. That cost Uncle Sam Ferguson five hundred thousand dollars and his Scotch blood is boiling. He's paying Jim Tandy big wages to manage his Wineglass outfit."

Cousin Ted could put a lot of meaning into anything he said. That's what a college education could do for a young man. It had cost Cousin Ted's Uncle Sam Ferguson a lot of Wineglass beef steers to keep his nephew Ted Ferguson in college. Cousin Ted had expensive tastes. But he also had a smart calculating brain inside his curly blonde head. That brain had it all figured out how he would inherit the Wineglass when Uncle Sam Ferguson died. And the Pioneer Bank of Tucson where Cousin Ted was cashier.

By the same token Cousin Ted figured he could take over the general management of the big Wineglass outfit that straddled the Mexican border. Ramrods like Jim Tandy were a dime a dozen, according to Cousin Ted. Tandy was just another forty-a-month cowhand who had somehow worked his way into Uncle Sam's confidence and got the job of general manager.

Cousin Ted was self-confident to the point of being overbearing. He took an almighty keen delight in looking down his handsome nose at Jim Tandy. But it was more than just that. Sam Ferguson had raised Jim Tandy who had been a range orphan since his father, Bob Tandy, had got killed by rustlers.

Jim Tandy had come up the hard way. Horse wrangler, cowhand, top cowhand, ramrod. The cow country knew that Old Man Sam Ferguson thought a mighty lot of Jim Tandy. And the cow country figured that the Old Man should hand the Wineglass over to Jim Tandy on a rawhide platter when he died. Cousin Ted was too clever and calculating not to realize it. Cousin Ted would gladly declare a bank holiday to go to Jim Tandy's funeral. Meanwhile, he never missed a chance to hamstring Tandy.

Cousin Ted was handsome. Nobody needed to tell him that. His curly blonde hair and little mustache were neatly trimmed. A six-footer, he had played college football. He had the chiseled features of an advertisement for white collars. He looked like a pretty boy—until you saw his eyes. They were a pale gray color, cold and shrewd and merciless.

Cousin Ted cut a handsome figure on horseback. Dressed up like a range dude, he sat his horse with a saddle swagger. He had played polo back East. He might have learned cowpunching if he had stayed on the ranch instead of taking the job at the bank.

Even after a long sixty miles on horseback Cousin Ted managed to keep his well-groomed range dude look. He had changed horses at the headquarters ranch and shaved and eaten. He was forking a horse that belonged in Jim Tandy's string. The gelding was tired, sweat-marked, spur-marked.

Jim Tandy looked at the horse and then up at the rider. Tandy was a lover of horses. He had ridden the rough string for the Wineglass while he was working his way up. He had broken and trained every horse in the Wineglass remuda. The Old Man himself wouldn't think of saddling one of Tandy's string.

"Git off." Jim Tandy was white-lipped. "Turn my horse loose."

Tandy stood five-feet-nine in his high-heeled boots. Wide across the shoulders and thick through the chest, he wedged down to a flat belly and lean flanks. His wiry black hair was matted with dust and sweat, and there was a week's black stubble on his blunt jaw. His nose had been broken once and badly set. From under heavy black brows his eyes were bloodshot from sun and wind, and they were puckered and gray-blue and cold as ice. Jim Tandy had never liked Cousin Ted.

THE dozen or fifteen Wineglass cowhands squatted on their hunkers around the supper campfire exchanged glances. Here and there one showed a faint grin. They hoped Tandy would give that high-chinned white collared dude son

a working-over. Interested, they watched.

Cousin Ted had no intention of tangling with Jim Tandy. He held a folded newspaper in his hand when he dismounted. Ignoring the glint in Tandy's squinted eyes, Cousin Ted shoved the folded newspaper toward him.

"Uncle Sam said look at this. It's the Nogales, Sonora extra. It'll bring you up to date."

Cousin Ted had never taken the trouble to learn Mexican. He called the Mexicans greasers, and held them in contempt. He did have an eye for the young señoritas, and he never missed a chance to dance with them at the bailes.

Jim Tandy choked back his white-hot fury. He'd caught a quick glimpse of the heavy black headlines: **REVOLUCIÓN!**

He spread the Mexican newspaper open, scanned it quickly. Under the black stubble and the sweat-streaked dust the color of his weathered skin went grayish. His eyes were squinted and hard and cold.

"Bad news?" Cousin Ted smiled his contemptuous smile.

Jim Tandy turned his back. He walked over to where his Wineglass cowpunchers squatted around the dutch ovens and big black coffeepot.

"How many of you fellers want to go along on a little pasear below the Border?" His voice was flat-toned.

"When do we start, Tandy?"

That was it—as simple as that. There wasn't a green hand in the outfit. They had all been down there before with Jim Tandy when the roundup worked the Santa Maria Grant twice a year, branding and gathering beef steers. The Lower Outfit, they called it. When the roundup had pulled in three or four days ago at the Cochise Tanks with a fresh remuda, they knew the outfit was going down across the Border to work the Lower Range.

They'd throw in with the Mexican outfit that was ramrodded by Juan Cobos Cuevas. They'd lay over a day and night and drink mescal and tequila and pulque and dance at the big baile and have one hell of a fiesta. They were all *muy simpatica, muy amigos.* That spur-jingling, swash-bucking young Cobos Cuevas would see to it that they all got enough to drink and to eat and to dance with, and then the two outfits would ride off their hangovers and sweat out the booze. From there on it would be hard work and no let-up.

Back at the headquarters ranch of the vast Santa Maria old Frascuelo Sandoval and his seven sons and six daughters would bid them adios. Frascuelo Sandoval was too old to make the hard rides on the roundup. He stayed home with his señora and his daughters and his seven grown sons.

There was always the threat of revolution and Don Frascuelo was fiercely loyal to El President Porfirio Diaz. His sons were strong Federalistas. While Don Frascuelo had leased his great Santa Maria Grant to his old friend Sam Ferguson because it was a good business deal, the old hacienda there at the Santa Maria Grant was their home. It was more than that—it was a village, and the Mexicans who lived there had been there for generations. They would stay there, in spite of hell, high water, drought, or Pancho Villa.

The Wineglass cowpunchers had anticipated their next pasear to the Lower Outfit. But this was no such pasear. They knew that even before Jim Tandy spoke.

"It says here in the Nogales paper," Jim Tandy said bitterly, "that the rebels have wiped out the Sandovals—Don Frascuelo and his seven sons. The señor Dios knows what's become of the Señora and her six daughters."

"Pancho Villa?"

"Quien sabe? But no. Villa is in Chihuahua. They're still running guns to him. That revolution ain't ready to bust loose. Anyhow the Old Man has bought protection for the Santa Maria Grant from Pancho Villa. That protection covers the Sandoval family—Don Frascuelo and his sons and his daughters."

"The hell you say, Tandy!" Cousin Ted cut in. He had filled a tin cup to the brim with strong black coffee. "Whoever spread that story is a liar."

JIM TANDY cut Cousin Ted a hard look. There was a cold ugly contempt in it.

"There's a long time fuse on that rebel powder keg." Tandy ignored Cousin Ted. "Six months at the earliest, the Villistas will swarm like hornets. But not now. The sign ain't right. Somebody has cut

the fuse and touched 'er off with a marijuana cigarette. I'm givin' you boys one guess who."

"Macklin!" One of the Wineglass cowhands spat it out like a bad taste in the mouth.

"Macklin." Tandy's voice was toneless.

"Who in hell," asked Cousin Ted, "is Macklin?"

"Ask your Uncle Sam when you git back to your safe cashier's cage in the Pioneer Bank. Tell the Old Man I'm not comin' to town. Tell him I've taken his Wineglass outfit on a little pasear across the Mexican Line."

Jim Tandy turned his back on Cousin Ted and gave his cowhands their orders. "Git your saddle guns outa your beds. We'll pick up extra ca'tridges at the gun runners' cache. I don't want any man along that wants to come back. There'll be some of us that'll never git back. *Andale!* Let's git goin'!"

Horse bells jingled as the horse wrangler rounded up the grazing remuda and hazed the horses into the rope corral. Dutch ovens were emptied and grub packed into rawhide kyack boxes. Tarp covered beds were loaded on bed mules. Carbines from the bedrolls were shoved into saddle scabbards. Every man moved quickly and without any waste of time. These were fighting cowhands. In half an hour the mules were packed and every man had his horse saddled. The outfit was ready to move camp, and the sun was going down.

Cousin Ted had a fresh horse saddled, and he stood apart, smoking one of his ready-made cigarettes. Nobody spoke to him or gave him a look. He was the nephew of Uncle Sam Ferguson, but they treated him as if he were not there. Who in hell did this ignorant, insubordinate Jim Tandy think he was, with his high-handed back talk? Calling Sam Ferguson the Old Man—acting as if he owned the outfit, telling Uncle Sam he hadn't time to ride to town.

"Look here, Tandy!" Cousin Ted's voice was tense with anger, sharp-edged. "Don't you think you're going beyond your authority? Uncle Sam sent you word to report to him at the bank as fast as you could get there. He told me to lose no time delivering his message. Now you're ignoring his orders. You're taking a hundred and fifty head of Wineglass horses and pack mules down across the Border where those stinking greasers are fighting."

"I'm takin' fifteen men along too, Cousin Ted." Tandy's grin was flat-lipped. "Includin' myself. Or don't you count the Wineglass cowhands?"

"I count you and your forty-a-month hired men a dime a dozen," said Cousin Ted.

"Cousin Ted could be correct as hell there, boys," nodded Tandy.

HE HADN'T mounted yet and he dropped his bridle reins and walked over to where Cousin Ted was smoking one of his cork-tipped cigarettes.

"Frascuelo Sandoval." Jim Tandy's voice was almost too quiet and casual. "His seven sons. His six daughters. You've been down there at the Santa Maria ranch. You've enjoyed their hospitality. You went down with the legal papers that you had him sign to give Sam Ferguson a ninety-nine year lease on the Santa Maria Grant.

"You bragged about it when you got back to Tucson, how you had the lease drawn up to give your Uncle Sam's Pioneer Bank the best of the deal. But old Don Frascuelo was land-poor and had no market for his Mexican cattle. Half a million in the bank was better than a two-million dollar cow outfit in Sonora. Sam Ferguson was his old friend, so Don Frascuelo and his seven sons and his six daughters put on a big fiesta. Barbecues. Music. All the good likker you could hold. A baile.

"You danced with his daughters. If you happened to remark that you liked somethin', one of the Sandoval sons made it a gift to you. Mebbyso you can't read this Mexican newspaper, but you know what happened to the Sandoval family. Don Frascuelo and his seven sons have been massacred. His señora and his daughters are dead. I'm kinda curious, Cousin Ted, to know what you think of the Sandovals."

Ted Ferguson smiled thinly. Tandy had been calling him "Cousin" Ted. Uncle Sam Ferguson had a daughter—nineteen and as wild and headstrong as a young

filly. Sam Ferguson had sent her off to boarding schools but she'd run away and come home. Sam never even scolded her. She was at the St. Joseph's Academy at Tucson now where the nuns spoiled her: she knew how to work them, and she was Sam Ferguson's daughter.

Her name was Jean and she was the one who had started calling him Cousin Ted. She knew it griped him. Tandy knew, too. Cousin Ted had asked Jean to marry him, explaining that they were third-cousins. Jean had told Tandy, and now, Tandy used it to knife him.

Ted Ferguson smiled his thin-lipped contemptuous smile, his pale gray eyes cold. He measured his words carefully.

"I remember one of the Sandovals quite well," smiled Cousin Ted. "Moonlight and the guitars strumming. I couldn't understand the words she said, but there was no mistaking what her eyes meant. What do I think of Conchita Sandoval?" Cousin Ted's hand that held his cork-tipped cigarette touched his thin-lipped smile.

Jim Tandy hit him, all his hard-muscled weight behind it. All the long, pent-up hatred he had for this big curly- haired handsome Cousin Ted caught Ted Ferguson full in the face. It flattened the thin smile and smashed the straight nose. It landed with a flat, spatting sound. Blood spurted. Cousin Ted reeled backwards and lost his balance and went down.

Tandy turned his back on the fallen man and walked with quick short steps to where his saddled horse was standing. He picked up his bridle reins and stepped up across his saddle and rode over to where his cowhands sat their horses.

"Andale! Let's git goin'!"

Jim Tandy and his Wineglass outfit rode away, headed for the Mexican border. Not a one of them gave Cousin Ted so much as a backward glance.

Chapter II

THE BORDER BANDIDO

COUSIN Ted Ferguson got the blood washed off. His lips were cut and bruised. His nose was swelling out of shape and his nostrils felt clogged with caked blood. His pride was the most badly hurt. His hatred and jealousy would never let it heal.

He had fetched along a large hammered silver flask of whiskey. The flask matched the silver cigarette case. He unscrewed the top of the flask that telescoped into a metal cup. Because he was finicky about drinking from a bottle, Ted poured a full cup and drank it down. Then he refilled it.

The whiskey was from Uncle Sam Ferguson's private keg and it was mellow. It was all the more potent because it went down so smoothly. It was dusk now and he was alone at the Cochise Tanks a few miles north of the Border. He had downed about half a dozen of these lone drinks and the whiskey was commencing to take effect. There was a huge round full moon pushing up over the broken skyline. It was as if they rode right up out of the big full moon—half a dozen heavily armed men on horseback.

The man in the lead sat tall and stiff-backed in his saddle, like a cavalry officer. His high-crowned Stetson sat at an angle on his handsome head. From under a neatly trimmed black mustache his white teeth bared in a grin. His skin was dark, almost swarthy, and clean-shaved except for the waxed mustache. From under thick black brows his eyes were a pale yellow.

He had a pair of pearl-handled, silver-mounted Colt six-shooters in carved holsters hung from two cartridge belts. His shirt was light-weight gray flannel, and he wore a charro jacket heavily embroidered with gold and silver. Under the chaps his pants were Mexican charro pants, flared at the bottom, made of glove leather. His silver-mounted Mexican spurs chimed like bells.

Each of his tough-looking men had a six-shooter in his hand. He rode up to Cousin Ted and threw him a rakish, mocking salute.

"I am Captain Macklin." His voice was sharp-edged. "Who are you?"

"Theodore Ferguson. Sam Ferguson is my uncle."

Macklin cocked his head sideways. His pale yellow eyes looked Cousin Ted over from head to foot with a cold appraisal. He looked at Cousin Ted's flat silver flask.

"At West Point," said Macklin, "a

cadet was taught to drink like an officer and a gentleman. A gentleman and an officer never drinks alone. I would consider it an honor to drink with the nephew of Sam Ferguson."

Macklin leaned a little forward across his McClellan saddle. His long arm reached out. His gloved hand jerked the silver flask from Cousin Ted's hand. Still grinning, he tilted the flask and drank deeply. He saw the hot anger flush Ted Ferguson's face. He twisted the waxed ends of his small mustache and his pale yellow eyes glittered wickedly.

"How much," he asked flatly, "are you worth to your Uncle Sam Ferguson and the Pioneer Bank at Tucson?"

"What do you mean? I'm cashier at the bank. Matter of fact, I manage the bank."

"And the Wineglass outfit?"

"And the Wineglass outfit. I'm general manager of everything Sam Ferguson owns."

"A valuable man." Macklin's voice lost its staccato bark, and sounded shrewd, calculating. "And a nephew to boot."

WITHOUT taking his eyes from the nephew of Sam Ferguson, Macklin gave his men their orders. His voice cracked like a whip.

"Frisk him for weapons. Give me what comes out of his pockets. Put him on his horse and tie his feet in the stirrups. It's going to cost Sam Ferguson more than his nephew's worth to get him back. We'll make the dicker with the Pioneer Bank for his ransom."

"Ransom?" Cousin Ted's voice choked.

"It should pay off better than gun running," said Macklin.

Macklin told his men to handle their prisoner without violence. Cousin Ted was too stunned and bewildered to offer any resistance. Macklin spilled tobacco into a white rice cigarette paper and rolled it and lit it. He had marijuana mixed in with the tobacco. He inhaled the smoke deeply and let it thread slowly out through his wide flat nostrils.

When one of his men handed him the metal cup he took a drink. Then he shoved the handsome silver flask into the pocket of his chaps. The silver cigarette case went into his pocket. He took the prisoner's wallet. There was a hundred dollars in currency which Macklin told his men to split up among them. He looked at the cards of identification in the wallet, and then he pocketed it.

One of the renegades took a fancy to Cousin Ted's spurs. Another claimed Ted's new 5X beaver Stetson. His boots fit the third renegade. Cousin Ted was in his sock feet with an old sweat-marked hat on his head. His pockets were empty and his .38 Special Colt was gone. He mounted when he was told to fork his horse. One of them handed him his bridle reins.

Three of them rode a ways ahead. The other three formed a rear guard. Macklin rode alongside his prisoner.

"It make those hombres feel important," Macklin bared his teeth. "I got to treat you like a dangerous prisoner. After we get to camp, it will be more or less up to you how you're treated. Co-operate and you'll be my honored guest. Get surly or out of line in any way and you're going to be treated accordingly. But you're a gentleman, no? Yale?"

"Harvard."

"Apologies. I should have recognized the accent. The Border is a far cry, eh? A damned far cry, I could tell you, from West Point. I was kicked out for a blackleg. Crooked cards. I spit on the damned flag. There was a Captain Macklin who rode with Quantrell's Guerillas—My father! A Rebel. He died cursing the Union flag. He taught me that Damnyankee was one word."

Macklin unscrewed the top and drank from the flask. His marijuana cigarette smoked down. His lips twisted and he sang softly.

Viva Villa!
And Macklin tambien!
We'll take Juarez
But we don't know when!

They rode at a steady trot, leaving the flat desert where the mesquite and palos verde and cactus grew, and into rough foothills and mountains.

"Quien es?" called a sharp challenge out of the night.

"Captain Macklin!" barked the owner of the name,

"Come on slow. One at a time. We're takin' no chance. What you got there?"

"Prisoner."

"When the hell did you commence takin' live pris'ners?"

"This one is worth his weight in gringo gold, Texas."

"Should I tip my hat to the gent? Or spit in his face?"

"He's Sam Ferguson's nephew Theodore. Ted for short. Make it easy on yourself, Texas."

"You pick up that shipment of guns, Captain?"

"Lacy lifted the cache. He'll deliver 'em."

THEN Macklin revealed that he had been watching and waiting back at the Cochise Tanks for quite a while, and he was well-informed concerning the movements of the Wineglass outfit.

"This hombre fetched Tandy the bad news. Tandy's taken his Wineglass outfit and headed for the Santa Maria headquarters ranch. I let 'em alone. They've got a good remuda and we need horses. We'll close in on 'em at the Santa Maria hacienda, wipe 'em out. But this Ted Ferguson is our big payoff. I'm bleeding that damned old Scotch Sam Ferguson white, and when you rob his bank you bleed him to death. We're riding our luck, Texas."

"Don't spur it to death, Macklin."

"*Captain* Macklin to you, Texas."

Texas was tall and lanky with beady black eyes, a hawk-beaked nose, and the lean jaw of a wolf. His hair was coarse and black. His dirty old Levis were shoved into the tops of scuffed boots. There was a chunk of tobacco bulging one lean cheek, and he spat.

"*Captain* Macklin." The black eyes glittered like red coals there in the bright moonlight.

"But don't ask me'n my Tejanos to fergit what you promised us when we taken Santa Maria. And we didn't git it."

"Blame the rustling of your outlaw leaves, Texas. Somebody took the news ahead. It wasn't any of my men. Treat Ted Ferguson as becomes his status as cashier of his Uncle Sam Ferguson's Pioneer Bank at Tucson."

"Shore thing." Texas stood alongside the withers of Cousin Ted's horse.

"Which one of them ears of yourn you want sent back to the damned ol' uncle of yourn?"

Texas took a big jackknife from his pocket, thumbed open a long blade, and stropped it along his brush-scarred chaps.

Cousin Ted winced. He felt cold and sick inside. Macklin had been entertaining him on this all-night ride with gruesome yarns that ran the gamut of crimes from cattle rustling and gun-running to the smuggling of contraband and the bushwhacking of men who rode for the Border Patrol. Macklin, drunk on Sam Ferguson's whiskey and the marijuana he rolled into white rice paper cigarettes, bragged about his border jumper crimes and his defiance of the law.

"Or I might swap you," Macklin had repeated several times, "for Sam Ferguson's convent-raised daughter Jean. Redheaded, isn't she? And built like a thoroughbred filly? Now that's a deal to conjure with, eh, Teddy?"

Fear crawled through the guts of Cousin Ted like a slimy snake. For the first time in his life he would be glad to see Jim Tandy and Tandy's Wineglass cowpunchers. All along the trail that night he had hoped that Tandy and his Wineglass outfit would spring a bushwhack gun trap on Macklin and his renegades.

But Tandy was headed straight for the Rancho Santa Maria.

Chapter III

NINE GRAVES

THE NINE graves were marked by nine new crosses. Two of the graves were set apart from the other seven. One of these two crosses had been whitewashed. There in the moonlight at the Rancho Santa Maria the new graves in the little cemetery took on a stark appearance. The moonlight was ghostly and the silence of the night hung over the deserted ranch with only the dead left behind.

No sign of human life had been left here. All around were bits of evidence of what had happened there. No light showed, and the windows of the adobe buildings, gaped like empty eye sockets. The doors hung open where harsh hands had yanked them back on their hinges.

At the little farms along the Rio Santa

Maria there were a few chickens and pigs and goats and burros and dogs that had been left behind and these animals wandered without the companionship of the Mexican children. They were the only sign of life left here.

The rambling hacienda with its white-washed adobe walls had been ransacked and left in a shambles. Fine old rugs had been trampled, tapestries and old oil paintings ripped by whetted steel and pocked by bullets, and all over everything were the stains of spilled liquor and old wine. The once bright crimson of spilled blood was now dried an ugly reddish brown, This was where the dying blood of the Sandoval men had been shed in defense of their home and loved ones.

Jim Tandy and his Wineglass cowpunchers scattered out and searched the place—first on horseback, then on foot. Then they gathered at the old hacienda, silent, grim-lipped, their eyes bleak. All of them had been here before when there had been a gay fiesta. Memories of music and gay laughter and happiness was in the mind of every man among them.

"This," Jim Tandy said, "was no fiesta."

They stood bareheaded at the crosses of the nine graves.

"This would be the grave of the Señora." Tandy reached out slowly and touched the white cross, his voice hushed. Then he looked down at his hand. There was the mark of the fresh whitewash on the ends of his fingers.

Someone had been left alive. Someone had fled into the mountains but had returned to bury the dead. Whoever it was had fled again into the Mountains.

There was the old mission on the estate. Before the altar, stubs of lighted votive candles in red glass cups burned low in front of the statue of our Lady of Guadalupe. Prayers had been said there for the repose of the souls of the dead.

Tandy looked inside the doors and saw the lighted candles guttering low. Tandy had sat there in those old handmade pews with the Sandovals when the visiting padre said mass and the younger Sandoval boys in altar-boy garments had served mass. And beside Jim Tandy had sat little Maria de la Concepción—Conchita and her smile as soft and tender as the depths of her dark eyes. He couldn't forget it.

The ghosts of the Sandovals were there in the candle-lit darkness of the old adobe walled mission, and Tandy backed out and closed the heavy old doors. He went back to stand beside their graves.

"Somebody's comin', Tandy!"

They had barely time to get back to the high mesquite corrals where they had left their saddled horses. Armed men on horseback came down on the ranch from all directions, riding hard. The blued steel of naked gun barrels and heavy bladed machetes glittered in the moonnlight.

"Viva Sandoval! Viva Santa Maria!" The harsh rasping vow of vengeance was in their war cry as they came charging down out of the foothills.

"Death to them gringo cabrons! But save that Macklin for Juan Cobos Cuevas!"

"Tuck in your shirt tail, Juan Cobos!" Jim Tandy bellowed it loudly. He rode out of the big high mesquite corral waving his hat on the end of his carbine barrel.

"Tandy!"

JUAN Cobos Cuevas—black-haired, black-eyed, slim as a boy, with the true heart of a fighting caballero. Juan Cobos Cuevas,—who loved to fight and sing and laugh and dance and challenge other reckless caballeros to duels for dark-eyed señoritas.

"Tandy! Compadre Tandy!" A sob choked his voice now.

Juan Cobos Cuevas never pulled rein until his sweat-marked horse slammed against Tandy's horse, and their stirrups locked, and he dropped his guns to throw both arms around the Wineglass ramrod.

Tears streamed down his beardless cheeks. Terrible sobs choked in his throat. Juan Cobos Cuevas—who wanted to laugh and sing and make jokes—knew also how to weep.

"Madre de Dios. Madre de Dios."

The throats of those tough Wineglass cowhands tightened. This was the gay and reckless young major-domo of the vast Rancho Santa Maria who knew them all by name. He had been so swaggering, so proud to give them all that there was to give in the way of the splendid Mexican hospitality.

This same Juan Cobos Cuevas was torn

apart inside by a terrible bitter grief, bleeding where a man can be mortally wounded but still not be lucky enough to die.

"Mi madre, Mi padre. Dead. Por Dios, they were my mother and my father to me. Was a massacre, Compadre Tandy. I was not here to die with them. But a man can die and still stay alive and that is how I am dead. Only this, my amigo. I want that Mackin alive.

"I want to make him die, a little at a time. I have a knife honed and whetted until the edge is sharp like the edge of a razor. That Macklin will feel hardly no pain when I make the first cut. Then I will dull that edge on a rock so that it will be ragged as the teeth of a saw, and then I will commence to make the cuts on his gringo hide. Small cuts and each cut will make a fresh hurt, and the blood will come, and there will be a hundred little nicks like that, and he will feel the hurt of each of those hundred nicks and cuts, and he will lose blood and when a man bleeds he becomes thirsty and he begs for water.

"And I shall give to this Macklin water to drink. Mixed into each drop of that water will be the gall of the javelina wild pig, which is the most bitter taste of all. He will need a smoke of his marijuana weed, and I will roll that hombre a cigarro and I will place it in his gringo mouth and light it for him, and he will pull the smoke deep into his lungs. Then he will get the raw burning taste of it, and it is not the marijuana smoke which puts fighting courage into the guts of a coyote coward.

"It will be the smoke of another burnt weed I learnt about from the Yaquis, and it is a smoke that acts and burns like fire to destroy the delicate membranes. Mackin will burn to death inside his lungs and his nostrils, and up into the high membranes behind the cheekbones. He will feel his eyes going blind, but it will be a red-hot blindness like the eyes are burning coals, and then while he is screaming the fire creeps into his evil brain and that gringo cabron will go locoed!

"That is what Juan Cobos Cuevas is going to do to that gringo Macklin. That hombre carnicaro. El hombre sanguinario. That butcher. That slaughterer of men, women. Por Dios, This is a vow!"

Harsh and croaking, each word tore from the throat of Juan Cobos Cuevas—a man who liked to laugh. It was the heartbroken grief of a man in the prime of life gone suddenly dead and old. It was the terrible grief of Old Mexico, concentrated in the heart of one of its gay, reckless caballeros. Old Mexico, with its gay music that was eternally tinged with sadness. Old Mexico, torn apart and splattered with the blood of many revolutions. Old Mexico that wore a white and green flag torn down and trampled under rebel feet; the red and yellow banner of the Villistas hoisted over the charred blood-flecked ruins of a conquered and ravaged Mexico; the red and brown stains of blood and guts and rum.

That was Juan Cobos Cuevas, terrible in his grief. To-morrow—mañana—the warm bright sun of Old Mexico would dry the tears and thaw the chill in the hearts of its people.

JIM TANDY knew that, even as he felt the wetness of the flooded tears of this young Juan Cobos Cuevas. There was a tightness in Tandy's throat and his eyes felt filled with white-hot sand. He made his own pledge with that of the grief-torn young major-domo of the Rancho Santa Maria. But it was a silent wordless pledge of revenge.

"What of the girls, Juan Cobos—the daughters of Don Frascuelo?"

"Safe. Also the daughter of the Señor Sam Ferguson."

"Who? Jean Ferguson?" Tandy felt his whole body grown suddenly taut.

"You did not know, then, that the Señorita Jean was down here? Seguro. But, of course. Perhaps she neglected to tell her papa. She ran away from the convent school. Jean Ferguson and our Conchita who is the same age in the same convent school. Too many players, said the Señorita Jean. 'No girl can look beautiful, Juan Cobos,' said Señorita Jean to me, 'with the callous on the knees from so many Masses at six in the morning and the evening vespers to boot.'

"So Don Frascuelo tells me to take them along with his other daughters deep into the mountains. It is a command I cannot refuse, a grave and serious responsibility that he entrusts to Juan Cobos

Cuevas. Riding herd on so many women, when I would have died here like a man should die. Carramba!"

Tandy was cussing under his breath. As if a man didn't have enough to handle when he ramrodded the Wineglass. Jean had run off again and this time she'd taken Conchita along when she played hookey from school. Jean had come down into Mexico to the Rancho Santa Maria, and she couldn't have timed it more neatly for trouble. Tandy felt cold inside.

"That damned Cousin Ted!"

"Ai! And there, Compadre Tandy, we got another trouble by the bushy tails—one more kettle of fishes, spilling the fats in the fires. Ees one hell of a muy grande son of a seacooks inside his cashier's cage when he counts the moneys for his Oncle Tio Sam at the Bank of the Pioneers.

"Ees one very sad money-changer now, and ees een worse fixes to come before the Oncle Tio Sam kicks over weeth the planty dinero moneys to pay off the ransomes that Macklin wants for the swap for Cousin Ted. And he won't take no 'dobe Mexican pesos neither.

"Cousin Ted ees goin' to look not so damn pretty when he parades in the gilded cage with the both ears whittle' off, no? Carramba! Never do I feel the fondness much for that stuck-up what you call the white collar dudes. But still I would not want even the Cousin Ted to lose the ears. Then he can maybe let the curly beautiful hair grow long to cover the scars. For a fighting man, the loss of the ears does not matter so much anyhows, but on the Cousin Ted who is a counter of planty money and a ladies killer, ees what you call a very displeasing business, eh?"

"You'll have to come again, amigo. Unscramble it and make it slower. In either language. But stick to one or the other."

"The news she travel fast in Mexico," Juan Cobos said. "I get the news Tandy and his Wineglass cowboys are across the border from the Cochise Tanks. Likewise Macklin has capture thees Cousin Ted and ees holding him for ramsoms. Also likewise thees gonronner Lacy ees make once more his mark like what you call the gringo double-cross. I get from the gringo Lacy all them gons he ees ronning for Mackin to the Villistas.

"Lacy sells cheap to Juan Cobos Cuevas. Lacy sells out to your Compadre Juan Cobos Cuevas for one ear—ees the left ear. I slice off that ear and he tells me where ees the gons, and I hand him back the ear. I offer to sew it back onto his head once more but Lacy says to never mind the hemstitchings. So I send that Lacy gringo to tell that Macklin ees the compliments of Juan Cobos Cuevas.

"I would have kept that Lacy hombre to swap perhaps for the Cousin Teds, but weethout the gons to boot, that Mackin would not geeve so moch as one 'dobe peso for hees hombre Lacy. And besides, I need them gons for my hombrecitos. You look a little seeck, Compadre Tandy. Bellyache?"

"Kind of a bellyache." There was a twisted grin on Jim Tandy's lean face. "Cousin Ted—sufferin' mackeral. Believe me, Juan Cobos, I don't know whether to give three cheers or quit my ramrod job and stay down here outa the Old Man's reach. Even on Cousin Ted, I wouldn't want to see no ears. You know where's Macklin's hideout, Juan Cobos?"

"Suguro—to be sure. Easy like you shoot a fish out of a ran barrels. Ees where once Geronimo goes and the Apache Keed. The Valley of the Yaquis. Can be also likewise for that gringo Macklin and his gringo renegades the Valley of Deaths. One way eento that valley, one way out also likewise. Them Yaquis are the ones Macklin have drove out because them Yaquis got not the gons and the cartridge ammunitions.

"So I geeve to them Yaquis them gons I buy from that gringo Lacy for the price of that left ear. Now, tomorrow night perhaps, I take my hombrecitos and them Yaquis weeth the gons and planty cartridges ammuntions, and I wipe out them gringos. All but Macklin. For Macklin, I have one special treatments. No?"

"No." Tandy was scowling. "You forget, Juan Cobos. Macklin's got Cousin Ted a prisoner. You know what Macklin and that renegade Texas and the double-crossin' Lacy will do to Cousin Ted if we commence that massacre. That damn' Cousin Ted—the Old Man's fair-haired pet nephew. Nope, we've got to go slow, compadre—and cautious."

"Por Dios!" Juan Cobos Cuevas pointed at the graves that held the murdered bodies of Don Frascuelo and his loyal Señora and his seven fighting sons. "Behold those graves—and then ask Juan Cobos Cuevas to go slowly!"

Jim Tandy had no word to say.

Chapter IV

CRINGE, YELLOW-DOG CUR

A MAN had to think cunningly, and he had to move fast. It was a one-man job, and that one man had to be Jim Tandy.

"Don't tell Juan Cobos Cuevas I've pulled out. When he finds out I'm gone, stall him. I'm givin' you boys your fu'ther orders now. The Old Man's daughter Jean is back yonder in the mountains. Juan Cobos will tell you where his hide-out is. Stay with Jean Ferguson till you git her up outa Mexico and back to the Old Man's home. Take the Sandoval girls along. That's all."

"Sure, Tandy."

They didn't have to put it in words. It was stamped there in grim lines on their dusty whiskers and thin sweat-grimed faces. They'd follow Jim Tandy through hell's hot clinkers.

More than any human on earth, Macklin hated Jim Tandy. Tandy had outlawed Macklin along both sides of the Border. Tandy had made a trip to El Paso a few months ago, and had crossed the bridge over the Rio Grande to meet Pancho Villa. Nobody but Jim Tandy and Villa knew what had been their agreement, but it had to do with the Santa Maria Grant, and the safety of the Sandoval family.

Pancho Villa had given Jim Tandy his word of honor that the Santa Maria Grant would remain unviolated and the lives of all the Sandovals safe. In return for that guarantee of safety, Jim Tandy had delivered guns and ammunition to the agents of Pancho Villa. Tandy, with the aid of Juan Cobos Cuevas, had hi-jacked every gun cache Macklin had along that strip of Mexican border. Tandy had used Macklin's gun-runner Lacy in locating the gun caches. Tandy had bribed Lacy and then backed up the bribe with a six-shooter to keep the double-crossing Lacy from going back on the deal. Juan Cobos Cuevas had loaded the guns on pack mules and made delivery to the Villista agent. Macklin never forgave a debt.

And there was the tough renegade Texas. Tandy and his Wineglass cowhands had caught Texas stealing Wineglass horses. They had dropped the loop of his own ketch-rope over his head and tied the other end hard and fast to a tree limb. Texas had begged off and they hadn't quirted his stolen Wineglass horse out from under him.

But Texas hadn't shown any gratitude afterwards. His hatred for Jim Tandy and the Wineglass outfit, and for Old Man Sam Ferguson, was a poison in his blood. Texas had thrown in with Macklin.

Even the double-crossing Lacy hated Jim Tandy. Money could always salve Lacy's hatred. But with one ear sliced off by Juan Cobos Cuevas, it would take a lot of money to buy Lacy.

Jim Tandy didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell if he carried his lone-handed plan into action. Nothing could keep Tandy from tackling it. His Wineglass cowhands stood there and watched him ride into the night alone. They knew they were watching a man going to certain death.

That was sometime a few hours past midnight, and before the break of dawn, while the big round moon lowered in the sky with its moonlight so bright that the stars could hardly be seen in the pale sky. A lobo wolf on the prowl sat back on its haunches to howl at the moon, and the rough broken hills threw back the dismal howl and sent a shiver of dread along Jim Tandy's spine.

It was a couple of hours later when dawn streaked the pale gray sky like streaks of blood. If Juan Cobos Cuevas had been along he would have said that when there is blood on the moon, men will die before the moon shall rise again.

The brassy sun was noon high when Jim Tandy reached the high-walled pass that led into the Yaqui Valley. He knew that he had been sighted, so he took a none too clean white handkerchief from his overalls pocket and knotted it on the end of his carbine barrel.

He rode into the rocky pass with his

saddle gun held high. If a man was close enough he would have seen Tandy's thumb on the hammer of the Winchester and his forefinger on the trigger. Tandy would shoot through a flag of truce—because when you deal with blackleg renegades like Macklin and Texas and Lacy, there are no rules.

TANDY sat tense and ready in his saddle, every nerve taut. Then a rasping voice barked a challenge, and he reined to a halt.

"Stand your hand!" He recognized Lacy's voice. Half a dozen of the renegades rode out from behind the rocks and brush. They surrounded him and their guns were pointed at him. Tandy eyed them coldly without flinching, and there was a grin on his black-whiskered face.

"If I was to drop over alongside my pony," said Tandy, "you fellers would all be pullin' gun triggers. You're all in line of your own fire, and you'd be gut shootin' one another. I didn't ride here to play games. Where's Macklin?"

Then he heard Lacy's laugh. Lacy could be bought. Tandy had the renegade's price all figured out. That laugh meant that Lacy was playing poker. It was a metallic, meaningless laugh. It came sometimes when there was no reason at all. Sometimes when he was in a poker game, he'd take a look at his cards and let go that short tinny laugh. He'd shove all his chips into the center of the table, and you had to call the bet if you wanted to find out if Lacy had filled his hand or was bluffing.

"Tandy's one hell of a josher."

Lacy rode out from behind the big granite boulders. His dirty shapeless hat rode at a crazy angle above the blood-stained bandage around his head. He was undersized and skinny and he had a thin nose that hooked down like a parrot's beak across a lipless mouth. His scraggly hair was dirty colored and he had no eyebrows. His eyes were jaundiced and bloodshot. Lacy relied on cunning and treachery, and he was the foxiest gun-runner and smuggler along the Border.

"Macklin ain't here," said Lacy. "But if it's a ransom deal, you know Lacy. And you've come to take Sam Ferguson's purty nephew outa hock."

"You're my huckleberry, Lacy. You got Cousin Ted on ice?"

"Not on ice." Lacy's laugh rattled. "On the fire. Sweatin! And he ain't as purty as he looks at that damned bank. Texas's always a-whittlin' at somethin'."

Lacy pulled the ear from the pocket of his chaps. He held it in the palm of an unwashed hand and bared his teeth in a nasty grin.

"When I offered to swap it to Teddy for the ear Texas whittled off his purty curly head, what do you think that big valuable white-collared bankin' cashier done? He got sick!" Lacy's metallic laugh sounded.

Then the laugh stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Lacy's eyes narrowed. "Come on, Tandy, I'll take you to him. He'll be glad to see you, eh?"

The renegades shifted uneasily in their saddles. Jim Tandy had a dangerous rep. They wanted to take his guns, pull his fangs.

"Let Tandy keep his guns. To hell with Macklin's order. I'm in charge here. But if he tries to come out, cut him down. Come on, Tandy. Time's a-slippin'."

When they were beyond earshot Lacy laughed. Then he dropped his voice to a rasping whisper.

"If Sam Ferguson gives more than a counterfeit Mex peso for that big yellow-bellied, white-livered nephew of his, he's gettin' cheated. I'm a rank coward, Tandy, and the world knows it. But alongside that snivelin', gutless, cry baby son, I'm a brave hero."

Lacy's narrowed green eyes cut Jim Tandy a sharp, shrewd look.

"You risked your hide, Tandy, to come here lone-handed. I got no brotherly love for you. But I hate to see a brave man killed on account of that coward. If Macklin ketches you here, you're a goner, regardless. He'll let Texas whittle on you before he gut-shoots you, personal. I'm not tryin' to throw a scare into you because you don't scare.

"I'll take you to this Ted thing. Then I'm escortin' you out past those gents on guard. Like as not you've long since forgotten it, but once you kept Juan Cobos Cuevas from killin' me when I taken you and him to the last gun cache. And you told Juan Cobos to let me go. You said I

wasn't worth killin' and that didn't sound so nice, but a man's life is a man's only life, and you give it back to me, and I ain't forgot."

"How much," grinned Tandy, "to boot?"

"Whatever you kin lay on the barrelhead some day."

"I'm takin' Cousin Ted out with me, Lacy, or I don't go till I've dickered with Macklin."

LACY shook his head. "You won't take him, Tandy. You wouldn't touch that big cry baby son with a ten foot pole. And neither, by the hell, would his Uncle Sam Ferguson! Not now."

"What are you tryin' to tell me, Lacy?"

"Sam Ferguson's daughter Jean is down here, somewhere in the Santa Marias where Juan Cobos Cuevas has her. She run off from that convent school and taken Conchita Sandoval."

"Who told you that, Lacy?"

"Sam Ferguson's nephew Ted. He told it to Macklin to save his other purty ear. Now Macklin's taken his renegades and gone to pick up Sam Ferguson's daughter. Ferguson might balk at payin' more than chicken feed for his nephew Ted, but he'll hand over his Pioneer Bank and throw in his Wineglass outfit too, to git back his daughter." Lacy's metallic laugh dinned in Tandy's ears.

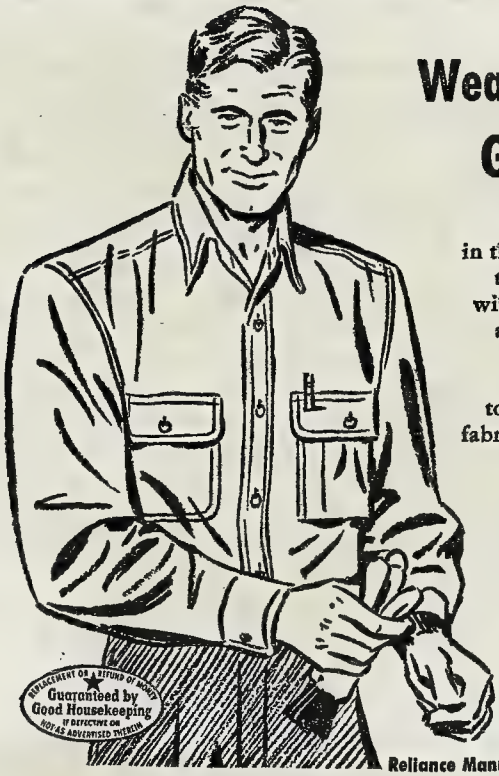
"Ted Ferguson told Macklin'?"

"Yonder he is, Tandy. You don't need to take my word for it. Ask him."

Cousin Ted was alone at the camp. They had him tied to a snubbing post in the middle of a round mesquite corral. He was a sorry sight. He was covered with dirt and spattered with blood. His curly blond hair was matted with sweat and dirt. One side of his face was masked with a crust of blood on his ear. His nose and lips was still swollen and discolored from Tandy's fist. When he saw Tandy, he let out a croaking sob.

"Cut me loose, Tandy! Get me away from these inhuman sons! I'll give you everything I got. I'll go back East and never come back. It's yours. For God's sake, Tandy, save my life!"

Tandy sat his horse in silence. He let



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Cousin Ted finish his desperate plea. Then he spoke quietly.

"You told Macklin that Jean Ferguson was down here in Mexico."

"He made me tell. He kept saying over and over that he'd swap me for Sam Ferguson's daughter. But I didn't open my mouth. Uncle Sam had told me to tell nobody. There at the Cochise Tanks you treated me like I was a rank outsider and never gave me a chance to tell you. I wasn't going to tell Macklin.

"But that murdering thing called Texas cut my ear off, to send with the ransom note Macklin made me write Uncle Sam. Then Texas was going to cut off my other ear. Macklin told him to stop. Then he asked me where he could locate Jean. He had hold of my hair, and I was tied to this damned post, and Macklin said if I told him the truth neither I or Jean would be harmed. When Uncle Sam paid the ransom money Jean and I would be escorted across the border. So I told Macklin. What else could I do?" His voice broke in a dry sob.

Tandy dismounted and took out his jack-knife and cut the ropes. Cousin Ted collapsed at Tandy's feet like an empty sack.

Tandy rolled Cousin Ted into the creek and sloshed him around till he got some of the stink washed off. Then he found a jug of mescal and told Cousin Ted to drink. He pointed to the pile of stacked carbines and boxes of ammunition.

"Ever shot a gun at a man?" asked Tandy.

Cousin Ted shook his head. He was sodden wet and getting a little drunk.

"You're goin' to shoot at one in a few minutes. You better shoot to hit—if you hope to git outa Mexico alive." Tandy turned to Lacy.

"You, too, Lacy. The three of us are goin' outa here together."

Lacy's tinny laugh was short and ugly. His green eyes glittered with cunning. "My number's up, anyhow," said Lacy. "Thanks to Juan Cobos Cuevas. If Mack-don't kill me, Texas will. Macklin gave those six renegades orders to shoot me if I tried to coyote. It's your deal, Tandy."

His tinny laugh clattered and went silent. His lipless mouth twisted at one side.

"Jim Tandy and his two tough gun slingers with rotgut booze mixed with their rabbit blood," he said in a reedy voice.

He took the jug away from Cousin Ted and gulped down the raw mescal like water. There was a look of craft in his green eyes.

"I'll decoy them six renegades here. Set your gun trap, Tandy."

Lacy pointed the barrel of his saddle gun at the sky and shot three times.

"Their favor-ite sport when the boss ain't around," grinned Lacy, "is huntin' for Macklin's booze and marijuana cache. That's supposed to be the signal I've located it. They're our meat when they ride up."

Bushwhacking wasn't to Jim Tandy's taste, and he had only disgust for the job. But when the stakes were this high, you played the game according to the renegade code that discarded all honor. You killed before you got killed. Tandy told himself to remember that those were six of the Macklin renegades who had slaughtered the Sandovals.

When those six tough renegades rode up into sight, their horses spurred to a wild race, Tandy's eyes were squinted and merciless as he lined his carbine sights. Tandy's saddle carbine fired the first shot, and he shot to kill. His second shot knocked another rider from his saddle before Cousin Ted and the wily Lacy commenced shooting.

By that time the four renegades had opened up, but their aim was bad. It was over as suddenly as it had started. There were six horses with empty saddles—six dead Border-jumper renegades on the ground.

"I killed one!"

COUSIN TED'S voice had an ugly gritty sound. Shooting a man had by some strange quirk put some sort of courage into him. It showed in his pale eyes, and it wasn't a pretty thing to see in his eyes of a coward. Jim Tandy had seen it in the eyes of other men who held a smoking gun in their hands. Cousin Ted's pale eyes were the eyes of a man turned killer.

"You'll git your chance to kill a few more," said Tandy.

He told Lacy he needed a fresh horse, and Lacy said to take the pick of any of those six riderless horses. Lacy was already going through the pockets of the six dead renegades, taking anything he considered of value.

Tandy threw his saddle on one of the horses and mounted. He told Lacy and Cousin Ted to get on horseback. When they were mounted he told Lacy to lead the way, and Cousin Ted to follow behind. Tandy kept his gun in his hand when he dropped in behind them.

"I wouldn't want to give either of you a shot at my back," Tandy told them.

Cousin Ted had reclaimed something of his old arrogance. When he pulled the boots off one of the dead renegades, and took a hat from another corpse, he did the ghoulish chore with a relish that matched the look in his pale eyes. Maybe it was the booze and the marijuana in the tobacco he took from the pockets of the dead renegades and rolled into brown wheatstraw paper that did it to him. Or maybe it was the killing of his first man.

At any rate Cousin Ted Ferguson had turned into a dangerous man—all the more dangerous because there was a streak of yellow in him, and cowardice makes for treachery, and that is why a desperate coward drunk on mescal and hopped up on marijuana is more dangerous than a true brave man.

Cousin Ted had begged Tandy to save his life. But now that the job was done all gratitude was thrown aside. Instead of any feeling of gratitude, there was only hatred in the heart of Cousin Ted. Tandy had witnessed his abject craven cowardice, and when the chance came, Cousin Ted would try to get rid of Jim Tandy.

Tandy knew it even before Cousin Ted was fully aware of his own bitter hatred. Tandy was a good judge of men of all kinds.

"Whichaway, Tandy?" Lacy called back.

"El Rancho Santa Maria."

The sun was noon high in the middle of the sky, and Cousin Ted couldn't get his compass points from it. He wanted to head straight for the border.

"To hell with this damned greaser country. I'm headed for Tucson."

"Texas has one of your ears in his packet. Don't you want it back, Cousin Ted?"

"To hell with the ear!" He tilted the jug he had fetched along.

"Your Cousin Jean is somewhere down here."

"Cousin Jean," he snarled back at Tandy, "got me into this stinkin' mess. So far as I'm concerned she can get herself out. I'm saving my own hide. I'll make it damned well worth your while, Lacy, to get me safe across the border. Write your own ticket."

"It's written, Teddy." Lacy's metallic laugh sounded.

"Then show me the way across the Border."

"You and me wouldn't get far, Teddy. Jim Tandy would stop us, quick. When the sign is right I'll take you home to your Uncle Sam. I'll hold you at the end of a gun till Uncle Sam pays me what I figure you're worth."

"How much, Lacy?"

"I'd sell you to the highest bidder, Teddy, and burn the money. I've handled all kinds of contraband, down to Chinks and dope. But I've never handled anything as rotten as you. I'd hang my price tag on you if ever I delivered you to Sam Ferguson. I'd write 'To be butchered on delivery.'" Lacy's tinny laugh sounded uglier than ever.

Tandy grinned flatly. He told Cousin Ted to follow Lacy. "I'm just borrowin' you from Macklin, Cousin Ted. I'm tossin' you back to him."

"The hell you say, Tandy. Just when and how and where do you make the deal to turn me over to Macklin?"

"Whenever and wherever we cut his renegade sign. You kin keep your guns. When I send you back to Macklin you kin go back shootin'. Shoot your way back across the line to your Uncle Sam. It's your only chance."

Chapter V

DEATH WAITS IN SHADE TREES

MACKLIN watched it all through his army field glasses. Now and then he would hand the field glasses to Texas and Texas would watch. Then Macklin would take them away and focus the powerful

lenses on the armed riders and the chuck wagon and bed wagon. But most of the time Macklin had the field glasses trained on the three canvas-topped, side-curtained spring wagons drawn by mule teams.

This was the outfit that pulled out from the Rancho Santa Maria at sunrise, headed north along the wagon road to the Border; headed also, for the armed ambush Macklin and Texas were setting at a place where the wagon road forded the Rio Santa Maria. It was a gravel crossing, wide and shallow with the water hub-deep on the wagon wheels, belly deep for horses and mules.

The Wineglass cowpunchers were riding armed escort, but the wagon teams were driven by Mexicans.

For the first few miles the side curtains of the three spring wagons were drawn. Then there was a halt a little after sunrise and the canvas side curtains were rolled up and strapped. The occupants of the three spring wagons could be seen plainly.

"Seven women," said Macklin. "All in black. Their heads shawled by black rebozos. The six Sandoval señoritas. The seventh lady is Jean Ferguson." Macklin's yellow eyes glittered.

"You kin have the Ferguson gal." Texas grinned evilly. "I'll take my pick of them Sandoval señoritas. They got away a week ago when we made the raid. Now all we got to do is set here a-horseback an' let 'em come right to us. Pickin's, Macklin. Pickin's."

"Those are the Wineglass cowhands riding escort."

"Yeah. Them's the Wineglass sons. We got 'em out-numbered three to one. Pickin's. Pickin's, Macklin."

"Captain Macklin."

"*Captain* Macklin!" Texas spat it out.

"One of these times, when I no longer need you, Texas," Macklin eyed the black-haired renegade, "I'll correct you with a bullet."

"Unless I beat you to it, *Captain* Macklin. *And* collect them ears of yourn."

"You haven't the guts, Texas. And you know it." Macklin took away the field glasses.

Macklin was trying to pick out Jim Tandy from among the Wineglass men. But they all looked alike at that distance. The best he could do was to count them—sixteen. Sixteen Wineglass cowhands.

Macklin had about fifty hand-picked renegades in his outfit. He had lost a dozen men in the raid on the Santa Maria ranch. He had left six men back at the Yaqui Valley to guard Ted Ferguson. And he had sent the rest of his men into the Santa Maria after Juan Cobos Cuevas and the Santa Maria vaqueros.

Macklin had a contempt for the fighting prowess of Juan Cobos' vaqueros. He figured that one tough gringo renegade was equal to ten greasers.

BUT both Macklin and Texas had plenty of respect and fear for the fighting qualities of Tandy's Wineglass cowhands. Every man in the Wineglass outfit drew fighting wages from Old Man Ferguson. And the Wineglass men were damned almighty sure of themselves.

Yonder was an example—sixteen men. That was all Tandy figured he needed for an armed escort for Sam Ferguson's daughter and the six Sandoval señoritas.

Ever since the little wagon train had left the Rancho Santa Maria before sunrise, Macklin and Texas had flanked them at a distance. They had kept out of sight—scattered, never skylighting themselves. Macklin was using Indian tactics.

"They'll make a noon camp at the river crossing," Macklin told Texas. "To eat and change horses and mule teams. They've got two changes in that little remuda. That's when we'll move in on 'em. It's riskier and we'll lose a few more men, but in broad daylight we can keep from hitting the women. And the Devil in Hell have mercy on any careless renegade son that harms Old Man Ferguson's daughter Jean. There's a big dowry goes with that little red-headed lady when I marry her. . . . Well I'll be damned!" Macklin had been scanning the surrounding country with the glasses. He had them focused on three of the men on horseback. "Take a look at what I see, Texas." He handed over the glasses and reached for his marijuana tobacco.

"Hell's fire, if it ain't Lacy! And the Teddy thing. And Mister Jim Tandy the Wineglass ramrod. They've ketched sight of that outfit and headed to throw in with 'em. Now what do you make outa that?"

"Looks like Tandy is earning his Wineglass wages. And Lacy's sold out again for the last time. Lacy stands in good with Pancho Villa. That's why I haven't killed him. When Lacy double-crossed me and helped Tandy and Juan Cobos Cuevas lift my gun caches, Pancho Villa thought that was a hell of a joke on Captain Macklin. And he gave me orders not to harm Lacy.

"But Lacy's helped Tandy rescue Sam Ferguson's nephew Ted. And Ted was worth at least a hundred thousand in ransom money to me. Lacy's crowded his slimy joker's luck too far. You want Lacy's ears, Texas. They'll be yours for the taking."

"Big hearted Macklin. Ex-cuse me—*Captain* Macklin."

Macklin was watching Tandy and Lacy and Cousin Ted as they rode down out of the rough foothills to join the Wineglass escort.

"Looks like we got 'em all in the trap," grinned Texas.

"All," said Macklin flatly, "but one. Where is Juan Cobos Cuevas?"

TANDY had sighted the armed escort of Wineglass cowhands. Herding Lacy and Cousin Ted ahead of him with a six-shooter, he had headed off the outfit. At first sight of the three approaching riders the side curtains of the three spring wagons quickly rolled down and were strapped into place.

The horse wrangler rode out of the dust kicked up by his remuda. It was Juan Cobos Cuevas, dust-powdered, wearing an old faded denim brush jacket and brush-scarred chaps. Until he came close he would have passed for another Wineglass cowhand.

Juan Cobos cut Cousin Ted a hard quick look, grinned at Lacy, then spoke to Tandy.

"We are being watched, compadre, through the field glasses of that gringo Macklin. That, I feel sure-certain. Behind the curtains of the three spring wagons should be the daughters of Don Frascuelo, no? Also likewise the daughter Jean of Señor Sam Ferguson. For the eyes of that Macklin, ees better that you pay the respect to these ladies, eh? Hand me your bridle reins."

Cousin Ted would have dismounted, but Juan Cobos Cuevas snapped at him. "Not you, hombre!"

Tandy got something of a shock when he looked into the first spring wagon and saw the glinting black eyes of three of Juan Cobos Cuevas' fighting vaqueros.

They wore long black dresses to cover their clothes. The heavy black rebozos were off and their bared heads showed. Across their laps were loaded carbines. Opened boxes of .30-30 cartridges were at their feet. They motioned Tandy to silence. He withdrew his head from between the side curtains.

Then on to the second and the third enclosed spring wagon. Each held more of Juan Cobos Cuevas' hand-picked fighting Mexican vaqueros. They were heavily armed and dressed in the black mourning, only their bared heads revealing the fact that they were not the sorrow-laden Sandoval señoritas.

Tandy remembered Jean was supposed to be among them. With Lacy and Cousin Ted herded off by Juan Cobos but still watching Tandy, the Wineglass ramrod played out his game.

"Long time no see you, Jean. Mebbyso this'll break you from playin' hookey." He made it sound as if he were more angry than glad to see the runaway daughter of Old Man Sam. Then he walked back to where Juan Cobos Cuevas held his bridle reins.

"Now," said Juan Cobos Cuevas, his voice brittle, "we shall send both of these one-eared hombres back to the gringo Macklin, no? Por Dios, Tandy, but you were locoed to risk your life for that Cousin Teds. News travels in Mexico. Cousin Teds swapped heemself for hees cousin Jean. Carramba, one hondred deaths weeth that doll knife ees what Cousin Teds has comin' to heem!"

Cousin Ted looked sick now. But there was murder in his bloodshot pale eyes. He knew better than to beg mercy from Jim Tandy.

"Cousin Ted has killed hisself a man, Juan Cobos. He's turned tough—one gun more for us to shoot at Macklin's renegades. Let Cousin Ted stay."

"You have the too-soft heart, Compadre Tandy. But ees whatever you say."

"I'll take care of Cousin Ted when the

time comes," Tandy said to Juan Cobos.

"Then we send back to Macklin only thees hombre Lacy?"

"That," grinned Tandy, "is up to Lacy. Whichaway, Lacy?"

"Deal me in here, Tandy. We're both winners. You mebbyso fooled Cousin Teddy, but Lacy's got sharp eyes, and one sharp ear." Lacy was looking at the curtained spring wagons.

"We deal Lacy in, Juan Cobos."

"Tell them pair of one-eared hombres," said Juan Cobos, "to take over the horse-wrangler job. Keep the remuda behind and close to the bed wagon. We camp at noon at the crossing on the Rio Santa Maria. Every caballo in that remuda weel be needed. Pronto. Perhaps them one-eared hombres weel try to rabbit. 'Sta bueno. We can shoot them then or let them go. Either way ees better than to have soch hombres among brave men like we are, no?"

WHEN they had gone, Juan Cobos motioned towards the bed wagon and chuck wagon. "Each wagon contains more of the Santa Maria vaqueros, weeth their gons and their saddles. We geeve that Macklin cabron one hell of the beeg surprise, no?"

"But where," asked Tandy, "are the Sandoval girls and Jean?"

"Safe," said Juan Cobos. "They are at the convent school of St. Joseph at Tucson. Delivered across the border by Juan Cobos Cuevas. By order of Don Frascuelo—may his soul and the soul of the señora and the souls of his sons rest in peace. Amen." Juan Cobos Cuevas crossed himself.

"The journey was made at night, compadre, under the blanket of darkness. It was a long hard ride, and we changed horses often. I took enough men along to assure their safety. When I returned, it was all over. There was nothing left for Juan Cobos Cuevas to do but to bury the dead, and pay off the debt of those dead."

The sun was nearing high noon in the sky, and the hour fast approaching for the grim and uncompromising payment of that debt. Juan Cobos Cuevas tilted his head up to mark the time, and the look in his black eyes was a terrible thing to see.

Tandy saw it with eyes as bleak as those of his Mexican compadre. Then he stiffened in his saddle and pointed.

Cousin Ted was spurring his horse to a dead run, heading north towards the border—deserting. He had finally gotten his sense of direction. Cousin Ted was taking a course that paralleled the wagon road north.

Tandy lifted his voice. "Let 'im go, men!"

Then Lacy rode back, a sly grin on his face. His green eyes glinted.

"Teddy," said Lacy, "is homesick." His hard laugh sounded. Then Lacy spoke to Juan Cobos Cuevas. "I know that you got them seven young ladies safe acrost the line a week ago. But this is the first time I have told that to anybody."

"Well I'm damned!" said Juan Cobos. He looked at Lacy with something almost like respect.

"Sometimes, Lacy," said Tandy, "You're hard to figure out."

"Even a man like Lacy," came the reply, "once had sisters."

They moved on towards the river crossing. Cousin Ted rode out of sight a few miles ahead where the cottonwoods marked the course of the Rio Santa Maria. But he did not show up on the road beyond the river crossing.

"Macklin's stopped Cousin Ted," said Tandy. "That's where the ambush is waitin' for us, Juan Cobos. That damn' Cousin Ted!"

"Don't commence feelin' sorry for Teddy," said Lacy. "Wait till you see whichaway that dude will play it. He got whittled on by Texas. And Macklin treated him kinda rough. But it's Jim Tandy Cousin Teddy really hates. And you kin name the bet and I'll call it, that you'll be dodgin' bullets from Cousin Teddy's gun when we spring that gun trap yonder." Lacy's laugh rattled into silence.

About half a mile this side of the crossing the wagon road dropped down out of sight to cross a deep arroyo. The outfit stopped. The remuda was bunched in a rope corral. The armed Mexicans climbed out of the wagons with their saddles. The vaqueros shed their black dresses and piled out with their guns and saddles. Teams were unhooked and the mules un-

harnessed. The wagons were left there.

The Wineglass cowhands bunched around Tandy. The Mexican vaqueros fell in behind Juan Cobos Cuevas.

"Viva Don Frascuelo!" Juan Cobos Cuevas called out softly.

Chapter VI

RED HELL ON THE DEVIL'S BORDER

"VIVA DON FRASCUELO!"

The wild war cry tore from the throats of the Santa Maria vaqueros as they spurred up out of the barranca and into a headlong charge.

"Viva Don Frascuelo!" Juan Cobos Cuevas's voice knifed through.

Juan Cobos Cuevas rode in the lead of his fighting Mexicans, standing high in his stirrups, his horse spurred to a run, bridle reins dropped over the horn of his saddle, a six-shooter in one hand, a machete in the other. Razor-sharp steel, rather than gun-metal, was the favorite weapon of the reckless, swaggering young major-domo of El Rancho Santa Maria. The six-shooter in his other hand was no more than a tool of destruction to wipe out anyone who got between him and Macklin.

Macklin pulled the smoke of his marijuana cigarette deep into his lungs and spat out the rice paper butt. His yellow eyes gleamed. Macklin and his renegades had been out-foxed. This was open country, and there was no retreat. Yonder came Juan Cobos Cuevas and his Mexicans, and they had come up out of that barranca as if by some conjurer's trick. Flanking them rode Tandy and his Wineglass cowhands.

"I told you Juan Cobos Cuevas was there!" Cousin Ted snarled. "Give me back my gun. I want to kill Jim Tandy."

There was no fear left in Cousin Ted. He was drunk and hatred was poison in his blood. He grabbed his gun from Texas, and his eyes were pale and merciless.

"Have at it, Teddy!" Texas snarled back at him.

Cousin Ted's only thought had been escape until he'd been caught in the bushwhack trap at the river crossing. Then he had spoken to Macklin.

"There's enough for both of us if we work it right, Macklin. Kill Jim Tandy and Juan Cobos Cuevas and their hired men, and then you and I can take Uncle Sam for all he's got."

Cousin Ted had his gun pointed at Texas. Texas slapped it away from his belly and spat tobacco juice.

"Yonder comes Tandy. Go git 'im, you want him that damn' bad."

Macklin carried a cavalry saber on his saddle. The blackleg outcast from West Point was an expert in saber fighting. He slid the sharp-edged, polished saber from its metal sheath and swung it. He stood in his stirrups and spurred his horse out from behind the brush. Whatever else Macklin might be, he was no coward. He met the challenge of Juan Cobos Cuevas with a swashbuckling fury. He shouted to his renegades in a voice that was ripped from his throat by fighting courage and headlong fury.

"Charge!"

Juan Cobos Cuevas and Captain Macklin rode at each another, headlong, without slacking rein. They crashed together on horseback and the heavy machete met the heavy cavalry saber with a ringing clash. Juan Cobos had dropped his gun and he grabbed the bridle reins of Macklin's horse. Macklin's left hand gripped the bridle reins of Juan Cobos' horse and their sharp-edged steel clashed and parried and clashed again. Their horses lunged and reared on tight rein, and the two men fought to the death with the sharp steel blades.

The Santa Maria Mexicans spurred headlong, yelling, shooting, and nothing this side of hell could stop that headlong charge.

MACKLIN'S renegades rode out to meet them, shooting as they came. Their gunfire was deadly. Then part of them, their fighting courage tainted by bushwhacker cunning, whirled and headed back for the shelter of the brush along the river. Texas was bushed up there shouting his orders in a saw-edged voice.

"Scatter, cowhands!" Tandy called to his Wineglass cowpunchers. "Smoke 'em outa the brush yonder!"

"You lost that bet, Tandy!" Lacy's laugh sounded alongside the Wineglass

ramrod. "Yonder comes Cousin Teddy. See you later, and I hope it ain't in hell!"

"Where you goin', Lacy?"

"After the ears of a thing called Texas!" And Lacy spurred out of sight into the brush along the river.

Juan Cobos Cuevas and Captain Macklin were fighting out their machete-saber duel apart from the wild melee that milled and crashed.

Tandy found himself face to face with Cousin Ted. There was all the hatred in them that had been storing up for years. All the smaller enmities and the rivalry that neither man had ever forgotten were there. They hated one another now with a deadly hate. Only death could blot it out.

Cousin Ted's gun spat flame and the bullet cut through the crown of Tandy's hat. Tandy's gun spewed fire, and Cousin Ted jerked in his saddle but he kept coming on, his gun shooting. But his aim was spoiled, and Tandy's aim was cold-nerved and deadly . He was killing Cousin Ted with every bullet he sent into belly and guts. But Cousin Ted kept coming, swaying and lurching in his saddle, his gun spitting flame.

Tandy threw his running horse into Cousin Ted's horse. For one brief instant the two enemies stared into each other's eyes, so close that their heads were almost together. In that brief moment Tandy read it all in the pale bloodshot eyes of Cousin Ted Ferguson—all the vicious hatred. Then the eyes glazed over. Cousin Ted slumped in his saddle, and his head lopped sideways, and he pitched headlong from his saddle. He was dead when he hit the ground.

"Viva Don Frascuelo!"

Tandy heard the cry through the slackening gunfire. He whirled his horse, and then he saw Juan Cobos Cuevas.

All the fighting fury Jim Tandy had felt during the heat of battle now went cold inside him. He was cold and sick inside.

Juan Cobos Cuevas was hatless, splattered by blood. The machete in his right hand dripped blood, and its steel was a bright crimson from its point to the leather-wrapped grip. His other arm was held high, and it gripped the severed head of the renegade Macklin.

The battle was over. The Santa Maria Mexicans were finishing off the wounded renegades, killing them where they found them. The Wineglass cowhands came riding out of the brush.

Lacy rode out. He held in the palm of his hand the two ears he had sliced from the dead head of the renegade Texas.

"I got Texas the first shot," grinned Lacy. Then he caught sight of Juan Cobos Cuevas, and he threw away the bloody ears. "I'm just a two-bit piker." Lacy's laugh broke off with a retching sound and he slid off his horse onto the ground.

The Santa Maria Mexicans dug a long trench for the renegade dead. Their own dead would be taken back to the wagons to be given a decent buriel at Rancho Santa Maria.

"Bury the head, then," Juan Cobos Cuevas conceded finally. "Bury it with the rest of that gringo carcass. Por Dios, I was cheated. That gringo Macklin died too easy! You have no wounds to show, Compadre Tandy? Madre de Dios, but someone's prayers they got answered!"

TANDY sighted a dust cloud coming, and said it might be some of Macklin's renegades. But Juan Cobos Cuevas shook his head. There were no more renegades. Those who had gone on a prowl after Juan Cobos had been cunningly led into an ambush last night were all dead. The dust cloud was coming from the north, from the direction of the Border.

It was Sam Ferguson, the Old Man himself, in his cowpuncher clothes armed with his wooden-handled six-shooter. With him rode a dozen of Mexico's mounted constabulary, the Guardia Rural.

Sam Ferguson's drooping gray mustache looked bristled and his puckered gray eyes were flinty. Then he sighted Tandy. A grin spread across his leathery face. "You kin give a man a lot of worry, son."

"Cousin Ted is under that tarp yonder," said Tandy. "He's dead. I killed him."

That was what Tandy had been dreading and he got it said as quickly as he could.

"I figgered you'd have to kill him sooner or later.

"Ted's father," the Old Man said quietly, "was my cousin. He was a tinhorn

gambler. He died in prison. He was sent to the pen for abscondin' from his own bank. I promised him I'd look after his son Ted like he was my own. I kept that promise. Ted knowed about it and he never lost any chance he could think of to hold me to it.

"I'd be a hypocrite and a liar if I said I was sorry Ted is dead. He wasn't any good. And he hated your guts because he knowed I loved you like you was my own son. He hated you worse when Jean told him she was goin' to marry you someday if she had to rope, throw and hogtie you." The Old Man grinned and his puckered eyes glinted.

"I promised Jean to fetch you home. She was tryin' on her mother's old weddin' gown when I left. You might as well give up, son."

Then the Old Man walked over to where Juan Cobos Cuevas was rolling a cigarette. The Old Man pulled his shaggy brows down in a fierce scowl.

"Little Conchita Sandoval," growled the Old Man, "is too damned purty and full of life to take the veil. She just ain't cut out to become a nun. But she's headed for the convent, anyway."

"Ees only een case I get keel that my leetle Conchita becomes the nun. Now, who knows—better than me, Señor?" And Juan Cobos Cuevas grinned. The Old Man's scowl vanished and he smiled slowly.

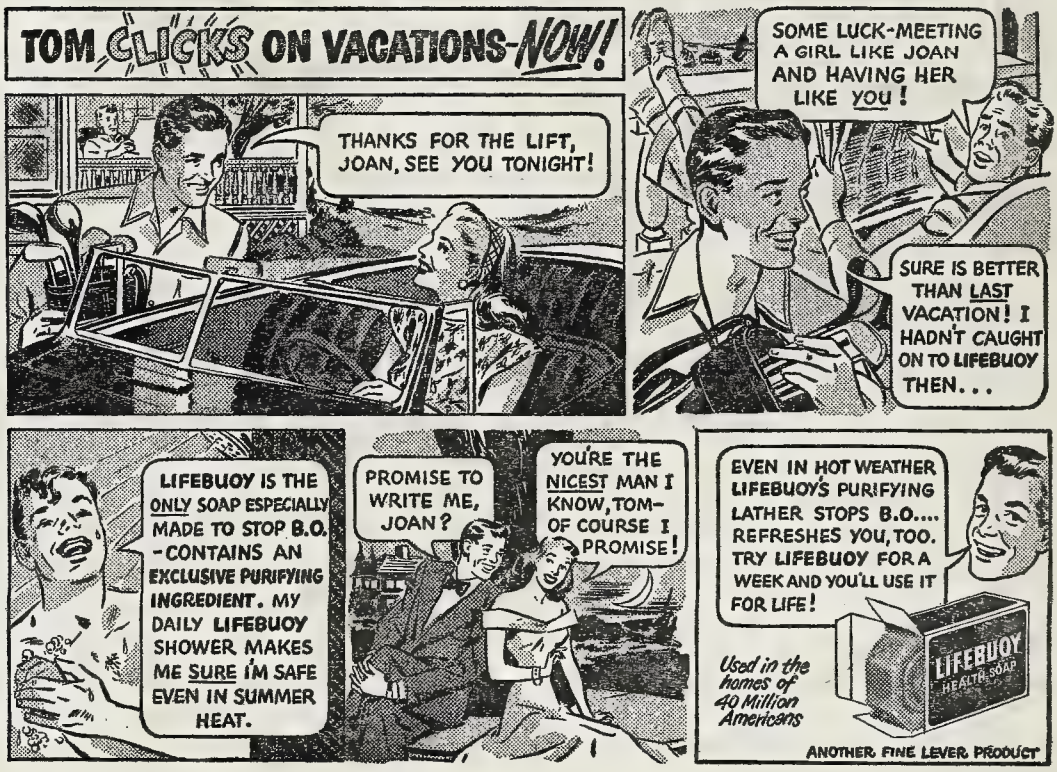
The other five Sandoval sisters had their plans, too. The oldest one, Guadalupe, had always wanted to become a nun and was taking her convent instructions soon. The others were planning to marry when they had made their choice.

When Juan Cobos Cuevas had delivered the six Sandoval señoritas safely across the border, he had given them the money Don Frascuelo had kept at the Rancho Santa Maria. Each was well provided for.

"What about you, Juan Cobos?" asked the Old Man. "Did Don Frascuelo provide for you?"

"Me? I am young. I have my health. For me I would take nothing."

"You've got the Santa Maria Grant," said the Old Man. "It's yours. Call it a



weddin' present. I'm damn' glad to git rid

Tandy grinned. He said that there was of it."

a lot of cattle to gather and trail across the line before the Villista rebels moved in. He'd fetched his Wineglass outfit down here and they might as well make a round-up of it.

"Don't be late for your own weddin'." Lacy's tinny laugh cut in. "You got six months, anyhow, to gather them cattle. Even when the revolution is won, the Santa Maria Grant ain't harmed. You got the word of Pancho Villa for that. Pancho Villa keeps his word and so does Lacy."

He took the ear from his pocket and tossed it at Juan Cobos. "I'll whittle off the mate to it, Juan Cobos, and hand it to you, if I ain't tellin' the truth. With Macklin and Texas and their gringo renegades wiped out, I kin go back to my gun-runnin' business. I'm just a two-bit gun runner, and mebbyso I'm talkin' outa turn. But I'd like to wish Jim Tandy and Juan Cobos Cuevas and their brides all the best of everything—providin' you're lettin' Pancho Villa's gun-runner Lacy ride away alive and back to his waitin' business."

TANDY reached out and gripped Lacy's hand. Lacy seemed a little embarrassed. He covered it with an uncertain laugh.

Then Juan Cobos Cuevas and Old Man Ferguson shook hands with the gun-runner Lacy. The Rurales had their hands on their guns. They were loyal Federalistas, and the Villistas were their rebel enemies.

"Let Lacy go." That was a command and it came from Old Man Sam Ferguson.

Lacy was not the man to crowd his luck. He mounted and rode away, looking back across his shoulder at the grim Rurales until he was out of gun range and then out of sight.

Juan Cobos Cuevas was a little weak from the loss of blood. But he said the blood would be replaced by the tequila he had fetched in one of the wagons. So he would ride on horseback with his Compadre Tandy and the Señor Sam, like a caballero. A man did not ride in a wagon flat on his back to his wedding. Especially a man like Jaun Cobos.

As they rode along, Tandy saw that the grief clouding the eyes of Juan Cobos Cuevas was slowly disappearing. That was good. Juan Cobos was a true Mexican, a caballero, a good compadre, a fine man.

"You ever ask that young 'un of mine to marry you, Tandy?" The Old Man broke the silence as the three of them rode along together.

"Gosh, no! No, sir. Jean's always bin just a kid underfoot."

"That's how I figgered. You're a good man, Tandy. When was it you found out that the Old Man's daughter Jean was somethin' more growed up? That's what I want to know."

"Somewheres down here." Tandy's face was reddening. "When I figgered I might never see her alive again. Then it hit me like a ton of bricks. Guess I never thought of it before."

"That's as good a way as any. Near as I kin recollect, Jean was six years old when she told me she was goin' to marry Tandy, and so far as I know she ain't never changed her mind. I told her then that Tandy was the one and only man I knowed that was good enough for her. Old Man Sam, as you know by now, ain't never bin known to change his stubborn mind about nothin'. It's bin cut an' dried that long, son.

"Don Frascuelo was a man who believed in God. Him and his Señora. His children. Don Frascuelo was my friend, like you and Tandy are friends. You've paid off his debt, accordin' to your lights. Don Frascuelo is almighty proud of you right now, Juan Cobos Cuevas. He'll want you and Conchita to be happy. That would please him very much."

"Si, señor."

"It'll be a quiet weddin'—both of 'em. Just you two men and your brides. The Sandoval girls. I'll give away both them young brides in marriage. And may God bless you all."

Then the Old Man rode on ahead and the sun went down and the moon rose round and white and clear above the distant horizon.

THE END

By TOM ROAN

"We'll kill you!" screamed the man. "That's my dog, damn you!"

SON OF FROZEN HELL

Men hated him and women laughed at him—that tough, half-man, half-brute jeeringly called "Beauty" Melody. . . . But dogs and animals loved him — and sometimes a real man may die for the love of a dog. . . .

SHORT and stumpy, almost wide and thick enough for two men, he was like a fleeing ghoul in the after-midnight darkness. As he ran he darted from shadow pool to shadow pool, suddenly stopping here and there to stand and listen while he peered all around him. The smell of the waterfront was on him now, for he had come to the railroad tracks in

the center of Western Avenue and slithered between the lines of freight cars.

Waterfronts were the places he knew best. He had seen so many of them in his forty years. He had been in all the major ports, bays and coves of the world seven times around. It was through them he had come to the strange lands.

The mob was well behind him, probably still searching among the narrow alleyways and runways off Seattle's notorious Skid Road, the hangout of loggers from the timber country off Puget Sound. It was only the cursing, snarling and heaving of broken chairs and tables that followed him. The smell of the blood was still in his nostrils, the wide wings yet quivering. So many times and so many places just like this.

Never in his life had Beauty Melody started a fight. Men started the fights with Beauty Melody. His body and his face were both against him—and he had had no part in the making of either of them. Nature had done all that. Nature had gone back through the ages and picked his moulding from the men of the caves, shaping him with diabolical fury, giving him the wide outshot jaw, the hump of his massive shoulders, the thick and hairy neck, the low-sloping forehead with hands and feet like shovels. To add to the mess she had given him the softest pair of blue eyes ever in any man's head. Then she had given him the voice of a woman, and a disposition that was almost angelic.

He slid between two tall boxcars and leaned forward on his elbows to rest for a couple of minutes, his great chest rising and falling, his breath laboring. Rest would do him good. All men had to stop and rest now and then. Besides, blowing like this, he might come upon a policeman. The officer might want to know things.

If he looked at him in any kind of light the blood and the cuts on his face and hands would be visible, and that would mean trouble—real trouble. At Headquarters they would know all about the fight by now. It would mean the jail, away to the penitentiary or—maybe—the gallows. And Beauty Melody had never been in jail despite all his adventures. He had only dreamed of jails. The thoughts of them curdled his sensitive soul. He would be dead inside one within a week—from sheer terror.

His ship would be here somewhere not far away. Even with a low fog rolling in from off the bay she would not be too hard to find. She was a tall, old-time merchantman, just in only two days ago off the long haul from India. Her masthead would loom above the fog if he had to stand on the top of a boxcar to sight them. Or he would find her by her smell, a smell that ran into a thousand smells—spices and teak and tea, fine leathers, tar and ropes and sun-baked decks—the smell of the East all over her.

If tales were true there would be the smell of blood too. She had been in piracy long years ago, the most notorious wench of all in that fast and loose business. If he tried to stay aboard her the police would have him in no time. A couple of men he had talked to back there knew he was aboard the old-time merchantman. Maybe he had talked too much.

He spotted her soon after slipping on between the cars. Now he would move quickly, but he was holding himself to a walk here. His clothes were few enough. But clothes were clothes. Among them was a short, thick, fur-lined coat, one he had picked up in Russia years ago. Then there were certain little keepsakes, this and that picked up in his far goings. Nothing very important but keepsakes just the same, one of them a little bronze elephant given to him by a woman in Bombay, one of the few women who had been kind to him.

IT WAS dark here, the fog thick, and he was in luck. A line hung from the starboard side of the bow, and the metal fender that kept rats from going up the rope or coming down off the ship had slipped and was resting against the side of the dock. Beauty Melody never needed anything better than that to board a ship, and this would let him miss the watchman somewhere amidships. He caught the line, and went up hand over hand until he could catch the low forward rail. He swung over, and landed on the forcastle head without a sound.

The rest was easy and fast. The forecastle slide was open. He went down quickly and softly, past the men asleep to

his right and left. The head was as black as ink. In a moment he had found his old sea bag. It was already packed. He liked things like that, neat, shipshape, no clothes piled here and there, nothing to look for.

There was nothing to look for now but the little bronze elephant. He reached under his pillow, his hand closing on it, pulling it out on its bronze chain. The hand started it toward a pocket, but then he changed his mind. If this was luck he needed luck tonight. He took off his dinky hat, looped the chain around his neck, and let the elephant down inside his collar.

Now he was ready to travel. As he had slipped aboard in India, he was going from the ship here. Tossing his bag down on the dock he again took to the line. It was an effort to swing himself up and over the heavy timber fender, but he made it quickly and noiselessly, stopping to slip the metal fender up the line as far as he could, never wanting to see anybody get into trouble even if the man who dropped the line had been careless.

The fog was still thickening. That was good. But when he reached the street he stopped in his tracks. It was through a break in the fog that he saw the six policemen, their badges flashing, all of them heading straight toward his ship, a mob of ruffians behind them.

He swung to his right, the fog swirling around him as he broke into a swift, silent run that kept up for a full six hundred yards. Then he slowed to a walk, knowing that the fog had kept him hidden all the way.

Now to find a ship that would soon be heading up the sound to the open sea. He had taken a walk this way only yesterday afternoon and he had seen cargo going aboard a certain ship. That meant that she would sail before noon. He knew all the signs.

Counting the docks now, he found her, lying in against her starboard side—a short and stumpy tub, broad of beam, half-passenger, half-cargo. In a few minutes he was aboard her, walking up the gangplank. There was no sign of a watchman on deck. The elephant was a real good-luck charm at that! He had never scoffed at such things, knowing that it was not given to men to know everything.

In two minutes he was down inside the ship, slipping along a near-dark passageway, working his way aft, getting the lay of things. He came to a dimly lighted galley. This was where the crew would eat. Food had been left on the table—meat and enormous boiled potatoes, bread and butter, a coffee pot kept warm by a low alcohol lamp in the corner.

Almost as if he belonged here, he started wolfing down the food, huge slices of the meat, a fistful of pickles, cold beets with lumps of butter as large as his two thumbs. Three or four cups of coffee washed it down. Then he made a couple of enormous sandwiches, and moved on. Now he would know where to get food for the taking.

He found a door in a bulkhead and let himself into a dark hold covered by canvas overhead. The second he closed the door behind him he heard dogs growling. It was then that he spoke for the first time. He knew dogs. Dogs were always his friends, on one side of the world or on the other. His voice did something to them. It was so quiet, so gentle, any dog would stop growling.

He kept talking as he moved on, not wanting a sudden hell of dog-barking to break loose. Now he could see the eight big boxes with strong screen wire fronts arranged in a double tier against the bulkhead in the corner, each box holding a single dog. In a lower box he could soon make out a huge, snow-white brute stirring restlessly. The dog started to growl again. He stopped, still talking softly.

The big white dog seemed to be the meanest of the lot. It took time to quiet him, much longer than it took for the others. When he was quiet Melody moved carefully on, wedging himself in behind the boxes and finding enough space to lie flat on the deck, his sea bag making an excellent pillow.

This was safety at last, the only kind he had ever known in so many long years, and in fifteen minutes he was sound asleep with no hint of a snore. When he opened his eyes sleepily he knew that morning had come and the sun was already fairly high in the sky. He lay listening for a few moments, knowing that something besides mere morning had aroused him. Then he felt it, a faint, slow vibration stealing from

one end of the heavy ship to the other.

That vibration meant that they were warming up the engines, and that also meant that they would be sailing within two hours. That was good. *Sailing.* He dropped back. In three minutes he was asleep again, awakening only when he felt a stronger vibration racing through the ship.

Propellers were biting into the water; the ship was slowly beginning to back out in the bay. He listened for the bells, heard the stop, then the slow speed ahead, then the full speed. Now they were really up and going somewhere, and it would not take too long before they were at the eighty or ninety-mile run of the sound. Then the ship would be rolling out into the open sea.

A couple or three more days of hiding, and then who would care. They would find him a good man in sail or steam, just as the captain of the old Indian Merchantman had found him, calling him the most able man he had ever seen aloft.

HE WAS sound asleep again when he heard the door open. Two men came in. A peep through a crack between the boxes showed that the first man was short and stumpy, wearing a battered blue uniform that rated him as the third officer of the ship. Such men were spending most of their time these days as supercargoes, having charge of the storing below.

The second man was over six feet, a wide-shouldered, deep-chested fellow wearing gray and a brown and white-spotted cowhide coat, a huge white hat on the back of his head, a short cigar in the side of his mouth. He had a little lizard-tail blond mustache. He took the lead almost at once, the dogs rising and growling in their boxes, the white dog the worst of the lot. The man spoke, his voice a strange, half-laughing wheeze that seemed to strain him from his head to his heels.

"Don't they love me!"

"They hate you, mister." The third officer's voice was not too friendly. "I saw that yesterday when you came aboard. God, how they hate you!"

"White Lightning most of all." Again there was that strange, half-laughing wheeze and the frightfully strained face. "All he lives for, I think, is the day when he can catch me off-guard and tear my throat out. Hardest dog I ever had to make mean. Didn't want to fight! Damned coward at heart, I think."

"I wouldn't know about things like that." The third officer's tone was getting surly. "I never went in for such a thing as making dogs mean. I thought you tried to make the mean ones good."

"You're not a dog-fighter, mister!" There was a little better try at a laugh. "Everybody just hasn't the guts for the business." There was another laugh. "But it means dough to me. Plenty of dough." Again the laugh. "I take it. By the time I'm through up North I'll own Alaska."

"Alaska, huh?" The third officer's voice was growing contemptous. "Mister, Alaska is a damned big country. Damned big!"

"Oh, I don't mean the earth part of it." The big man shrugged so hard his cowhide coat swished from side to side. "Damn that! Wouldn't give fifteen cents for every square yard of it. I mean I'll have all the money in Alaska before I'm in that new town of Fifty-Three a month.

"Take White Lightning." He pointed to the white dog's box, the dog still snarling and growling furiously. "In spite of the way he so ingloriously hates me he's already brought me in more than ten thousand. Think of it, mister. *Ten thousand!*" There was a longer wheezing laugh, the face twisting. "Ten thousand beautiful dollars, right into the palm of my hand.

"And there's Devil Annie." He pointed to another box. "She's a bitch-fighter. Annie's brought in nearly six thousand already. Think of it. Nearly six thousand!" There was another one of those infernal laughs. "And can she fight! Yellow lightning herself on four feet. Fast, if you know what I mean."

"I've got to be getting back on deck, Mister," the third officer said angrily. "There's other work to do. But I'll tell you one thing. They've got some damned big huskies and malemutes in Alaska, and some of them, at least, can fight like hell."

"Oh, don't you talk pretty!" The laugh came again. "That's just what I expect them to say, what I want them to believe. That's how I'll take Alaska apart."

They were turning away a minute later,

the cowhide swishing, dogs growling, the man still boasting, the third officer glum. Melody watched them through the crack, and then piled back on his sea bag, eyes staring upward. Never had he heard a man talk like the man in the cowhide had talked. In all his travels he had never come upon a man who made his money fighting dogs.

But Alaska was on his mind now. *Alaska!* The last great frontier, Land of the Midnight Sun and the Northern Lights, land of ice and snow, of gold and wild romance. Beauty. Melody had read about it. Now he would see it, look at it with his own eyes, seeing all of it he could see.

Maybe he would go prospecting for gold —and get rich. That reminded him of the three pieces of gold in the watch-pocket of his trousers. Sixty dollars flat to face Alaska. But he would make good as long as men left him alone. He always made good, anywhere, anytime. And maybe up here he would find himself a pretty Indian girl, one who would not find him too hard to look at, a companion no matter what her blood or her coloring.

He lay back smiling, thinking and thinking. Seattle was as good as far, far away now, gone with the rest of his wild memories. Maybe, after all, he had not killed anybody, but he was always afraid. Six men in the past had died in places where he had had to fight for his life. He hit too hard, that was all. Too hard when they came at him in mob rushes, too hard here and there when he was in corners and had to come out of them or die.

And it was all because of his unpretty face, his voice and his size, shaped by Mother Nature, not by Samuel Melody.

Now he could sleep and dream. It was not going to be so easy to get around from now on. A sailing ship had men on the move every hour of the day and night, yet, even aboard ship, there would be that dead hour now and then after midnight when men moved about no more than they could help. By some means he would make it—and bring back a little for the dogs to make them his friends.

AT THE sixth stop he knew he had come at last to Fifty-Three. That much he had learned from the third office

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when the man in the cowhide came down to feed his dogs late every afternoon. At this point the ship would turn back, heading for Seattle and a couple more runs before the cold set in and ice started gathering on the Yukon.

Night was on them here as they edged the ship's starboard in to a pier. The man in the cowhide had said he did not want the dogs put on the dock before sunrise. That meant that a hiding man could stay aboard until almost dawn and have a place to sleep and good, solid food and hot coffee to steal.

They had never yet had so much as a glimpse of him, moving as shadow like as he had moved, anticipating, always a few steps ahead of them or a few behind. There was a stack of dishes behind the dog boxes now, meaning that he had stolen all manner of food for the dogs as well as himself. In one of his rambles he had found the great ice box filled with a couple or three tons of the best of meats, and many a juicy chunk had been gently thrust through the feeding door in the bottom of the boxes—good meat, the kind a dog liked, not a meager rip from the cheapest, filled with black gunpowder to throw a dog's stomach out of gear and keep him mean.

He fed them once more just before he was ready to leave, taking all the dishes back. In his sea bag there were no less than twenty fat sandwiches, something to tide him along in this new land for two or three days until he could find a place to stay where he could earn his bed and board, and maybe a few dollars a month besides. A man had to prepare for Alaska. It was a raw land, and bitter-hard, giving up its gold to a few, and death to a hundred more who could not make the grade.

It was raw. He could see that. He could see that after he had dropped to the dock and had fled around the corner of a warehouse and up the steep, high river-bank to the town of Fifty-Three itself. Everything at first looked new in the growing light, the logs of the houses recently cut and dragged down a tall-timbered slope to eastward. Only here and there stood an old house, showing that it had only been a very small settlement until some great urge or nearby gold strike had started things to humming. A man would find word here, plenty of it by the looks of things.

He went up and down the one street, looking and looking, studying it from end to end, reading crude lettering on rough-board pieces of fir here and there. As the dawn faded into daylight a place called the Malemute Saloon on the western side of the street opened its doors. Men appeared as if by magic and started pouring inside, everybody eager for the morning dram. He trailed them in, and turned to his right to lean himself against the bend of a rough bar.

"Whiskey—of course?" The big bald-headed bartender fired him a glance. "With water or without?"

"No, sir." Beauty Melody held up his huge right hand. "I don't drink. I only wanted to come in and ask if you could tell me where I can find a cheap room."

"Whaddy you mean, cheap?" The bartender stared.

"Oh, something for two or three dollars a week."

"Two or three dollars a week!" The bartender stared with sudden amazement filling his face. "Why, damn it, man, it would be hard to find a dog pen with a strip of canvas over it for less than ten dollars a night in Fifty-Three!"

"Oh."

"You're new in this town, fellow." The bartender seemed to be trying to grin, all the rest of the talk at the bar having come to a sudden halt. "New to all Alaska, ain't you?"

"Yes, sir, I'm new. I'm just off the boat."

"And dumb as hell!" Somebody said that down the bar, and the crowd laughed. "Where'd you get the voice, pretty boy?"

"I'm not pretty, I know." Beauty Melody's spirits took another thousand-mile fall. "I am as I am. But I'm a strong man, a very strong man. I'm a good worker at anything I do."

"But that voice? Where—?" Someone began.

"Never mind the voice!" The bartender glared down the bar. "In Alaska a man comes as he is. His history begins the day he arrives. Look, fellow." He swung back to Melody. "Let me see your hands. God!" He swore when Melody spread them palms upward on the bar. "What hands! Fingers like bananas! And hard,

full of corns. Yes, you'll work all right.

"Now listen to me." He poked a finger under Melody's nose. "I'll tell you something good, but you won't get rich. There's work here, plenty of it, but the cold will soon shut it down. Go across that street. Turn up it until you come to the first break between the houses. Go in there. Follow that trail for about two hundred yards to a old log house on the first bench of the ridge. That's the Widow Mabel Brown's stopping house. She needs a boarder, bad. Hasn't yet got her winter's supply of wood cut.

"Got it?" He glared. "Good. Take the job. She'll feed you, and damned well. You won't get a room, but she'll let you sleep on the kitchen floor by the stove. If you can't cut enough wood to keep the fires going, then, by God, you can freeze and go to hell as far as I'm concerned. But you won't do that, I know. You'll *work* and keep all the fires going, doing anything she asks you to do. And—and you'll be warm and have your belly filled with the best of the North!" He slapped the bar. "Tell her Curly Wolf sent you."

"Mister, I sure thank you." Melody picked up his sea bag. "I'll go, and I go right now."

AND HE was going, his heavy bag under his arm as though it were no more than a sack of straw. In a short walk he found the alleyway, though it was near the end of the street. The rest was easy. He walked up the trail and to the back of the big log house. In a few moments a tall, gaunt woman with red hair was facing him.

"Yes," she told him, hands on her hips, looking him up and down, "I want a man. Curly has been trying to find one for me for weeks. You can sleep in the kitchen on a cot. The pay's sixty dollars a month and all you want to eat. Sixty dollars for now. Only fifteen when the winter really lets down and business goes bad. When will you start?"

"Now," he told her, happily. "Where is the ax and the saw?"

"In the kitchen. The saw's hanging on the wall. But, first, you'll have a good hot breakfast. No man can work without eating. Come in. You can put your bag in the corner over there."

It was the beginning of things, the opening of a new world, a new life. Before dawn he had the fires going, taking the chill out of the house. After breakfast he hit the slope, dragging down long sticks of trees that would have balked four men. Hour after hour he plugged steadily away until firewood cut to proper length filled the big sheds at either side of the house. Then he stretched it out from under the sheds, until the Widow Brown called his hand and stopped him.

"There's enough now, to last into next winter," she said. "I don't want the whole place covered with firewood."

"But it's good wood," he told her, "and so easy to get. I've only been at it two weeks."

There were other things to be done to prepare a big log house for the long, cold and dark winter ahead. Great sacks of potatoes and canned meats and vegetables had to be brought up from the general store at the head of the street. They had to be placed in the deep cellar under the center of the house.

The cellar had to be dabbed here and there with clay to keep the air away. Earth had to be banked around the house, making an air-tight wall on which the heavy snows could fall. The house itself had a hundred places where new clay and moss had to be gobbed between the old logs, and windows had to be chinked and tightened. There were a hundred things to do if one looked around for them.

He met tragedy head-on when he went down for the last sack of potatoes. His mistake came when he stopped on the store porch and looked toward the new wire pens and low dog houses. He saw White Lightning go down.

The man in the spotted cowhide was there. Around the fighting pen stood at least thirty men, all of them staring. The man in the cowhide laughed. White Lightning was downed, but he was up again, fighting for his life with a huge gray and liver-spotted malemute. As he came up the man in the cowhide started to laugh, that wheezing, terribly strained laugh that seemed to draw his belly and face into knots.

"There I told you," he cried. "White Lightning always comes up. There goes your malemute, mister! Your thousand

dollars belongs to me. As soon as we get your dead dog out I'll lay another thousand on my fighting White Lightning. Without any rest, mind you, without any rest for my dog. Do you take me and my money, mister?"

"But the white dog is bleeding!" Beauty Melody was there without knowing how he had got there. "He's in a bad way."

"Clear yourself away, pretty boy!" The man in the cowhide laughed in his face. "We've got to hook a dead dog out of that pen. Clear out unless you've got some money you want to bet on the next fight."

"But I don't bet on dog fights." Beauty Melody's voice was gentle. "I don't bet on anything, and certainly not this. This is murder."

"Clear away, I said!" There was no laugh this time. "And now."

"No, I am not clearing." Beauty Melody shook his head. "Look. The white dog is off his feet again!"

"Clear!"

"I clear for no man, my friend." Again Beauty Melody's voice was gentle as he shook his head. "The white dog is down. To send another dog in on him is to murder him. And he's a good dog. I heard you say so on the ship. You said he was hard to make mean. If—"

"Damn you, you meddling son!" The man in the cowhide had struck out, a blow straight to the chin, one that would have sent another man sprawling. "Clear away, damn you, *clear.*" He struck again. *"Clear!"*

"Mister, don't hit me again, please."

"Why, you damned son, I'll beat your head off."

"No, now, you're starting something, mister!" Alarm came into Melody's voice for the first time. "I'm getting to where I don't like it. Let me take out the white dog."

"Don't hit you again?" A white froth was beginning to etch the mouth of the man in the cowhide. "And I'm starting something, am I? I'm starting something, am I? All right, I'll give it to you!"

He surged closer, fist coming up. This time he was not fast enough. Beauty Melody caught him by the collar of his strong coat. He swept him closer, catching him below the middle with his right hand. There was a yell as he swung the man in the cowhide off the ground and up and at arm's length over his head. For a second he held him, then hurled him with terrible strength right into the faces of the crowd, knocking six men down with the sheer flying weight of him.

NOW Beauty Melody stepped to the gate of the fighting men. He put his left hand on the post. His right hand caught the gate. He pulled with one hand, pushed with the other. The lock on the gate tore away with its hasp. He gave a twist. The stout hinges gave away. With a toss he sent the gate flying behind him and stepped on inside the pen, a man with only one purpose in his mind.

The white dog lifted his head and growled. Beauty Melody spoke. The dog shook his head and tried to get up. Beauty Melody spoke again. The dog fell back with a faint wag of his tail. The man picked him up, slipping him under his left arm. He was walking out of the pen when the man in the cowhide yelled at him.

"Put that damned dog down or I'll shoot your guts out." His right hand was sawing at his cowhide as he blundered to his feet. "Put that dog down or I'll fill you full of lead."

"Better not," warned one of the men who had been knocked down and had just stumbled back to his feet. "He's got no sign of a gun, and they'll hang you if you shoot an unarmed man."

"But he's walking off with my dog."

"Yes, he's walking off with your dog."

"Come on, men!" The man in the cowhide was lunging forward now. "Some of you want to bet on the next fight. Come on."

"You'd better keep away." Beauty Melody reached his right hand down and picked up his hundred-pound sack of potatoes, swinging it to his shoulder. "Don't get me started."

"We'll kill you," bellowed the man in the cowhide. "Come on, men. That's my dog, I tell you!"

Beauty Melody walked on, not the least afraid for himself but afraid for what he might do. The man in the cowhide followed. About a dozen men were behind him now, the rest at the pens keeping their distance. At last Melody turned

again. He let down his big sack of potatoes on one side, and White Lightning down on the other.

The man in the cowhide came on, steadily but slowly, his long coat open. Back there under that coat was a six-shooter. At any moment he would pull it, afraid to close in, afraid of those powerful hands and long arms. Suddenly he stopped, his hand sweeping back.

"Remember what I told you!" yelled a voice in the background. "You can't shoot an unarmed man here."

"Damn 'im, he's picked up a rock as big as his two fists!"

"A rock ain't a gun. You're crowding him. Go in and fight 'im if you like, but watch your gun, I tell you!"

The man's hand hesitated, then came out from under the coat. He came on, white-faced, scared but moving. When he was ten feet away he stopped, setting himself, then he was coming at a charge, big fists in front of him, nobody knowing exactly what he was going to try to do in a position like that.

Melody had dropped the rock he had picked up. Now he moved forward, swiftly, surely, in that cave man crouch. Suddenly he jumped, left hand flying up and out, and again he had his man by the collar. Then he was in the air, poised for a second, then hurtling through the air. Men scattered to keep from being struck. He hit the ground like a ton of rocks. Melody started to turn, then stopped in his tracks, a low growl catching his ear.

It was White Lightning, going forward like a shot. The man in cowhide yelled, throwing up his hands. White Lightning's long muzzle went in and under the hands. It was a deliberate and cool motion when his wide mouth closed on the man's throat. Then, left foot on the forehead, right on the man's chest, he surged backward, the rich red blood flying.

"Gawdamighty," yelled a man in the background, "he's hit the jugular vein!"

"Shoot the fool off'n 'im!"

White Lightning was in a fury now, slashing and tearing at the man's face, ripping it to the bone, all the hate and cussedness of forty devils racing through him.

Beauty Melody got to him now. He put a great hand down on the dog's back, speaking gently. White Lightning growled, hesitated, and backed off. Melody turned back toward the potatoes with the dog against his right leg, hugging to him. He picked up the sack, shaking his head, and walked on up the slope, knowing there was a dead or dying man behind him.

He had not gone far when Mabel Brown's voice came to him. He looked up and saw her. Just beyond her, watching silently, were the two fat Siwash squaws who helped her with the work.

"Samuel." The voice was soft, the name almost unfamiliar. "Samuel, you are a mighty man."

"I was strong as a child, ma'am." He set the potatoes down. "With my face and my voice it does not seem so. I—I have suffered much because of them."

"Samuel, I hate pretty men." The voice was still soft. "I blame you not a whit for what you did." She was coming closer. "I say it was a brave and noble thing. I've been listening to the dogs fight for days now. It was a terrible, brutal business. We like dogs too much in this country to stand for a thing like that."

"Well," he picked up the sack, swinging it to his shoulder, "I'll get these in the cellar, ma'am, and then I guess I'll be going."

"Going!" She looked at him with a little start, face going pale. "Going where?"

"I never know, never care. Just anywhere. That man was killed back there, ma'am. They always blame me, and soon they'll come to arrest me."

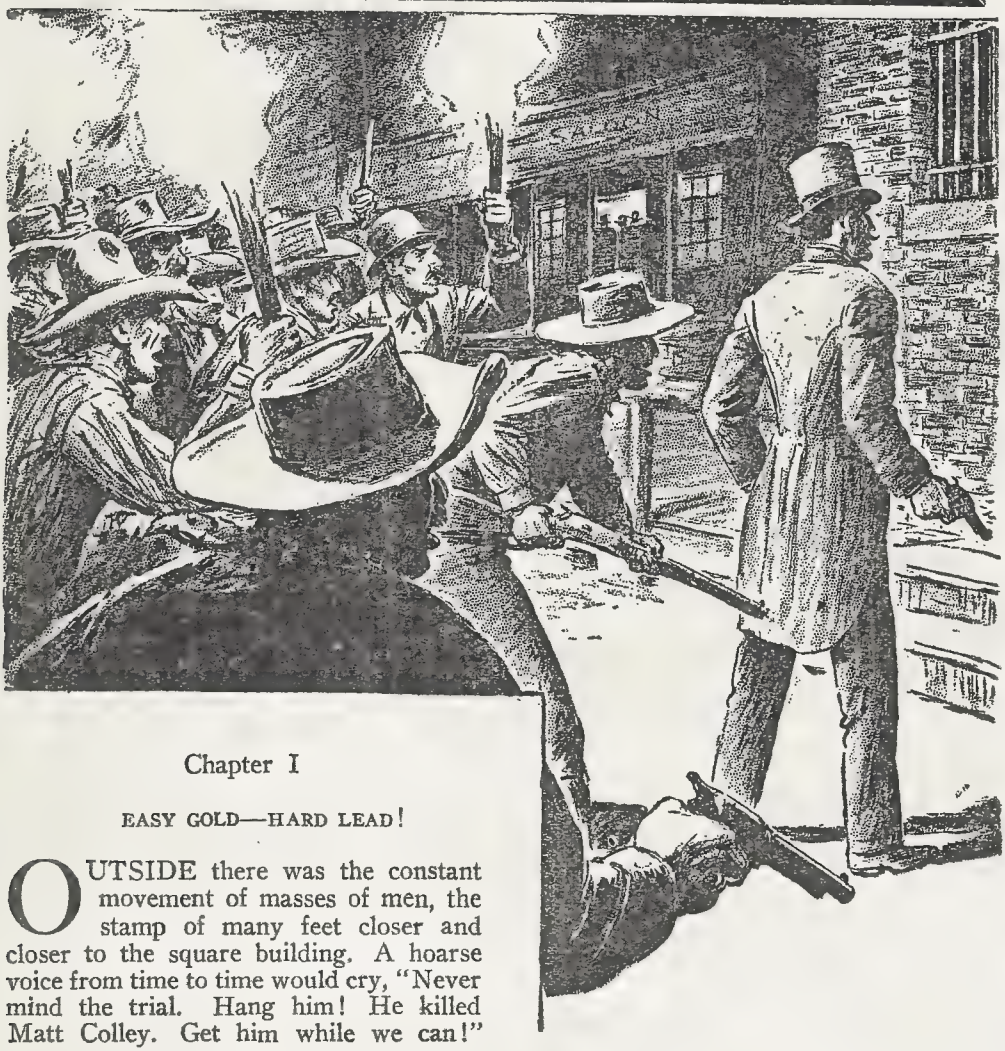
"Nobody'll come, Samuel." She tried to smile at him, but her lips were quivering. "Curly Wolf runs Fifty-Three. Besides, that pretty dog killed him."

"Curly Wolf likes you, ma'am. I could tell."

"He'd better like me." She laughed softly. "He's my brother! And, Samuel, you'll no longer sleep in the kitchen on a cot. There's a nice little room straight above the stove with a register in the floor to let the heat come up. It's the warmest room in the house. And—and we're going to keep that dog. I like dogs, and I hate pretty men. Come on, Samuel. You're a mighty, mighty man."

LET'S LYNCH US A LAWDOG!

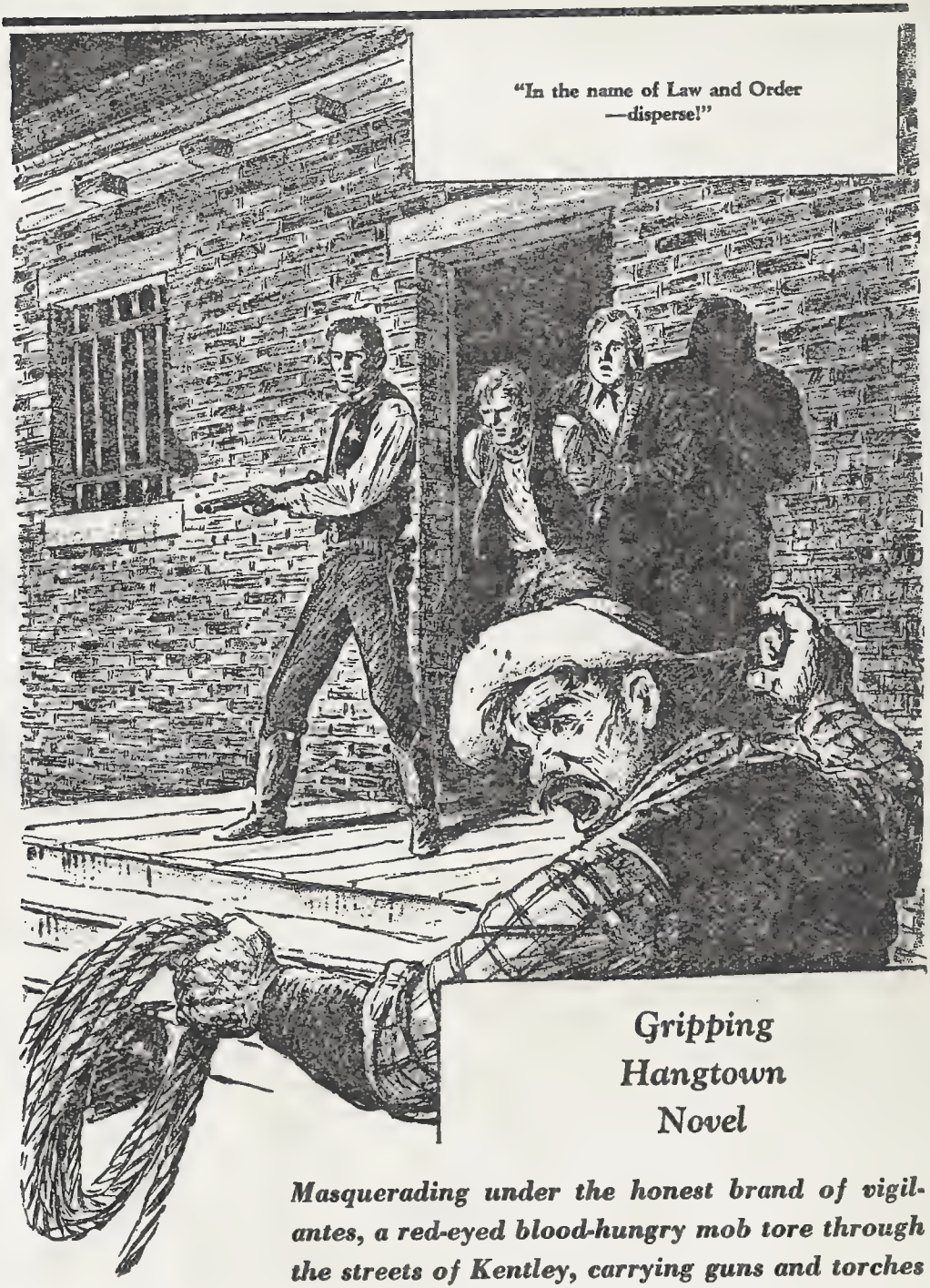
By WILLIAM R. COX



Chapter I

EASY GOLD—HARD LEAD!

OUTSIDE there was the constant movement of masses of men, the stamp of many feet closer and closer to the square building. A hoarse voice from time to time would cry, "Never mind the trial. Hang him! He killed Matt Colley. Get him while we can!"



Gripping Hangtown Novel

Masquerading under the honest brand of vigilantes, a red-eyed blood-hungry mob tore through the streets of Kentley, carrying guns and torches —the flames of which must spot-light the shadowed bounty on the head of the only man able to stay that useless destruction—Marshal Jack Bell!

"Murderer! He's a murderer! Hang the son!"

Jack Bellaman shivered in the room with the barred windows. It was not a regular jail. It was just a storeroom of a general merchandise establishment—the bars were against thieves who might break in. The jailers did not wear uniforms. They were private citizens without rights to arrest, much less to try and condemn a youth to death by hanging.

But Jack Bellaman knew what was in store for him tomorrow. The hard-faced, outraged men of the city had formed a Vigilance Committee. They had chased out of town a hundred thieves and killers. They had hanged others. And they had caught Jack Bellaman in the wrong part of town with money in his pocket and no explanation of how he had come to be richer than his captors.

That was his crime. Someone had certainly killed the crusading editor, Matt Colley. The body had been found in front of his print shop, hacked to ribbons. They had found a knife on Jack—and a gun, too. That was enough for the Vigilantes.

The youth walked the floor, his fingers stealing now and again to his neck. He wore a white shirt of fine linen, dark trousers and neat boots. He had come to the city penniless, but he had been shrewd enough to make a stake, then to run it up at the gaming tables. He was twenty years old that day, but he knew cards, he knew tinhorns, he knew the hard ways of life.

The growls of the mob waned, then increased. In the store the Vigilantes awaited others of the leaders. In a little while they would come for him and that would be the end. All his protestations would be in vain. The citizenry was aroused, it wanted blood. Too many of the crooks who had run the town had made good their escape. Victims were wanted.

The forces of law and order—hitherto farcical in their slight efforts to maintain peace and keep the town clean—were even now energetically making arrests where they could, to show that the Vigilantes were wrong in forming to take over the law-enforcing agencies. The city was a beehive of activity and many an innocent person would suffer, as always under mob law. Jack tried the bars of his windows for the hundredth time. If he only had tools.

He heard voices in the store. A man said, "Henry will appear inside a half hour. Then we can try Bellaman. Ain't any doubt about it. He was in the neighborhood, he had a knife, he's a gambler."

"He's awful young."

"Spawned by the devil," snarled a third voice. "Them kind start at birh."

"He'll hang. Henry'll be agin him. Henry was Colley's best friend."

"Certain he'll hang. But he's got to have a trial."

"We'll make it short—like the rope. Ha, ha!"

" 'Bout time we got a new rope. Too much give to this 'un. Strangles a man slow-like."

"Too good for 'em! Let 'em suffer. Dirty killers! Thieves!"

"Still, a man's got a right to have his neck stretched proper-like."

"There's rope right here."

Jack Bellaman could hear the thump of rope-end on the floor just beyond the stout door. He shuddered. Again he went to the window facing westward, toward the harbor. If he only had a half hour, to get to the dock and hire a boat. He could easily get a berth on one of the ships.

There was a sudden, stealthy sound. Jack Bellaman's heart stood still. His breath was in his throat, almost choking him.

A WHITE, slim, strong hand came into view. It was dark all around, but this shapely hand was visible, working. A slouch hat covered the face of the man, but the steel pry worked at the bars where they were imbedded in staunch timbers, twisting the sharp-pointed bar.

Jack bent his elbow, wrapping his coat about it, rapped the glass of the window. It broke, and only an uproar within the store covered the tinkling sound. With shaking fingers, Jack cleared the frame.

Then, suddenly, he was afraid. He whispered, "Who are you? If you've come to lynch me—"

The man tilted his head. The features were aquiline, the nose challenging, the brown eyes wide-set and intelligent. His mouth was large and mobile, his chin square, his lips full. He said, "Be quiet, Bellaman."

"Perry Wallace!" Jack whistled be-

neath his breath. "Wallace is suspected by many of being a Vigilante," he had read in the *Tribune* only the day before.

"He is a banker of gamblers, a buyer of mysterious merchandise, a man of money. He seems to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. We would like to know more about this Perry Wallace, a lot more." Thus had Matt Colley written on his last day, before the assassin's knife had dug into his vitals.

The bars creaked. Jack took hold of them. He was a broad-shouldered young man. His beginnings had been in the great State of Texas.

Perry Wallace helped. In a trice they had spread two bars. Donning his black coat, Jack wiggled through the opening and dropped the short distance to earth.

He saw at once that Wallace had been standing on a horse's back to reach the window. He said, "Thank you, Mr. Wallace. I'm innocent."

The tall man towered over him. He said, "I believe you are innocent, and I know they would hang you. Did they take all your money?"

"Five thousand dollars," said Jack bitterly. "But not all. They neglected to look closely at my belt. If I could get to a boat—"

"They would find you at once." Wallace made an impatient gesture. "Fools, fools, always fools. But never mind. You are young. Take this horse. Ride eastward, then south. At Pesquada there will be a man named Glenn. He will give you a fresh horse and direct you to the next stop. Get out of the state and never return. Make a new start elsewhere. Remember these vigilance committees are huge, strong and long of memory."

Jack stammered, "You took an awful chance, Mr. Wallace. If they'd caught you, they'd have hanged us both."

"You reckon correctly," said the tall man coolly. "Now get going. And maybe we shall meet again. Meantime, watch that third knuckle when you deal bottoms. You flash it!"

The tall man faded into the darkness. In a second he was gone from sight. The bent bars told their story, but there was paving below the windows and no trail was left. The Vigilantes bolted for the harbor and commandered boats.

Jack Bellaman continued his ride to the village of Pesquada. He was young enough to throw off the terror of his near-hanging, he was strong enough to elude other travelers, taking circuitous routes through the night without pause. He was naive enough to be amazed at his reception at Pesquada, at the businesslike manner in which they accepted his story, fed and bedded him, gave him a new horse and started him eastward again.

But he was not stupid enough to fail

to look to his money belt when he was only four miles from the man named Glenn and Pesquada. The belt was there. It was neatly slit, however. The gold pieces were gone.

Jack had been very weary, and he had slept hard. He remembered the villainous visage of the imperturable Glenn. He turned the horse and made a large circle, going back to the house at the edge of the little town.

He was weaponless. He went around the back and lay behind a stack of cordwood, waiting, watching. The sun was mounting the heavens. His dark coat was too hot, but he wrapped it tight and crouched, his eyes on the rear door.

It was an hour before Glenn came to the barn. He was carrying the saddle Jack had ridden in last night. There was stitching picked out by a sharp knife.

IT WAS pretty dark in the barn. Jack got there as quickly as he could. He saw Glenn hang up the saddle, his back to the door. The man wore an open holster with a six-shooter prominently displayed, and there was a knife in his boot. Jack made a leap and struck with his fist behind Glenn's ear.

At the last possible moment Glenn saw the shadow of his attacker. He ducked, trying to swing around. Jack snatched at the holster and luckily caught the butt of the gun. It came free in his hand.

He said calmly, "All right, old fox. Just hand over the money. I don't want to kill you."

Glenn growled, "You can't git away with this. I ain't goin' to—"

Jack said, "I hate to do this." He leveled the revolver, aiming at Glenn's belt buckle, his finger on the trigger. "I'll find the money anyway, after you're dead."

The ugly man blanched. He said, "In the house then. But you'll pay for this, ten times over."

"I already have," Jack said. "I died a hundred times yesterday, on my birthday. That's payment enough. Move, Glenn!"

There was a safe. There seemed to be other valuables in it. Jack did not feel that he had the time nor the right to look. He considered himself an honest man—he had never cheated anyone but crooks. And he always paid his debts.

He took his own money and counted it. He set aside one coin. He said, "I thought this was a friendly deed and that you would have scorned payment for keeping me overnight. Since it wasn't, there's your pay, Glenn. For my change I shall take this revolver—and your belt, please."

Glenn spat, "You'll be dead afore ye git outa the state."

"Thanks for the tip," nodded Jack. The belt fitted him very well. He buckled it on and the gun fell handily against his thigh, where he had worn a gun a few years before.

He mounted the horse and was gone. He did not follow the route southward which Glenn had indicated. He had no wish to sample more of the hospitality of the ring which aided escaping criminals.

He struck directly eastward, across the desert. He suffered the hell of thirst and sun; he almost had to carry the borrowed pony before he found the water hole.

Then he was able to go on. He was able to get clear away, and into Texas. He was able to stop then, and think over certain things.

It took him four years to get what he finally decided he wanted. But when the time came he bought the ranch, stocked it and settled down to grow with the country.

He had learned several things through the Vigilante Committee of that coastal city. He had learned that quick money might lead to quick death. He had learned that might makes right, unfair as that may be. He had learned that a friend in need is a friend indeed. And he had learned to have great distrust of the opinion of the multitude, as expressed in mobs.

When he was elected Sheriff of Wind County, he grinned all over his lean, tanned face. The mob, he thought, again was wrong.

Of course he was living under the name of Jack Bell, of Bell Ranch, by this time, and the town of Kentley knew him as a tough young rancher of great promise. His small but prosperous spread was only eight miles from Kentley, and the people, led by Jack's close friend, Peter Strand the storekeeper, thought he was the man

for the job. Kentley needed cleaning out in the worst way.

Chapter II

THE MAN FROM NOWHERE

THE years may or may not be a long time in a man's life. Approaching his thirtieth birthday, Sheriff Jack Bell rode over the acres of the well-stocked ranch and knew that if all went well he would soon be a wealthy man. True, there was a mortgage held by the president of the Bank of Kentley, and mayor of the town. But even as he turned his black cayuse into the trail toward the home ranch, a girl rode lickety split toward him, blonde hair streaming, laughing mouth calling, "Hi, Sheriff. How's law business?"

He said, "Miss Lucy Shaw, I believe. Howdy, ma'am."

The two horses came together and paused knowingly. She was a lovely young woman, wide-shouldered, strong of limb, with searching gray eyes. "I'm giving a party. You're such a hard man to find. I had to come and summons you."

"You only had to whistle," he told her.

"How long have I whistled now? Five years? Six?" She was without coquetry, direct. "You and your 'security.' What security is there in the world? Why have you wasted the years, Jack?"

He reached out and held her hand. "Because I had to be sure. Because I have worked toward a goal and couldn't stand losing when I was close. I had to do it alone. I couldn't ask a pretty girl to share the work and hardships. Especially a pretty girl whose father owns the bank, and who had been East to fine schools."

"Fool!" she said. "I might have married someone else."

"Then I would have been sure," he said gravely, "that my goal could never be attained."

She said, "But now you have what you need, and I can come and share it?"

"Don't put it that way, darling." His face contracted and seemed very youthful. "Don't tease. You know I love you more than life itself."

She swayed to him for a moment, then straightened and slapped spurs to the pony. She called, "Tonight at eight. We'll announce it, I insist."

He called, "Lucy! Wait." But she was gone, and her laughter, always easy, floated back to him. She had been patient, she had been faithful through the years since they had discovered love. He sat, one leg across the pommel, thinking about her, and a warm glow suffused his entire being.

There was the sound of a horse behind him and he whirled, wondering who could be coming from his house. He recognized the tall, lean frame of his friend, Peter Strand, astride a hack from the livery stable.

Strand said, "Ain't you never comin' home? Cooky said you'll be back soon. Wasn't that Lucy?"

"Yeah. Rode out to invite me to the party."

Strand lounged in the saddle, stroking the horse's neck. He was a leathery man a few years older than Jack Bell. He said soberly, "She tell yuh about the marshal?"

"No," said Jack. "She had something else on her mind. We—"

Strand interrupted, "They kilt him last night. Murdered him. Jest found his body this mornin'."

Jack Bell said, "Wait till I pack some duds for the party and I'll go in with you. Any ideas who did it?"

Strand said harshly, "Even if we knew, what good would it do? Jedge Asa Bush ain't sentenced anybody 'ceptin' a couple pore rustlers in a year. There ain't no law in the county outside you."

Jack said carefully, "I wouldn't subscribe to that, Peter. Judge Bush is old and easy-goin'. But that Lawyer Vereen is smart. He defends them, and the crooks hire witnesses, and the juries can't convict."

"Juries! Courtroom hangers-on. Can't get a decent jury. Kentley is bein' taken over by the crooks—Frisco Fred File and his men, Tex Kray, Nobby Mole, Doc Mason, that shotgun murderer. Marshal was kilt with a shotgun."

"You think Doc did it?"

"Nobody else kills with a sawed-off shotgun around these parts. Unless we got a new one," said Strand.

"But no other evidence?" asked Jack.

"None at all," said Strand grimly.

"Found him dead outside town, thassall."

Jack sighed. "I'll come in right now."

STRAND hesitated. Then he said, "Mebbe you better make like I didn't even tell yuh. Mebbe yuh better stay on the ranch."

"Why?"

"We're formin' a committee," said Strand defiantly.

Jack Bell sat very straight in the saddle. "No!"

"The best people in town," said Strand doggedly. "Me an' Bradshaw an' Cal Crewe an' Jan Stuppe an'—the Mayor will be in on it. Secret, of course."

Jack Bell said, "No Vigilantes. I won't stand for it."

Peter Strand said, "You know these crooks got to be run out. You know they done kilt three marshals on us. Why, you can't even get a man to stick as deputy. The jedge is no good. There's only one way—"

Jack Bell said, "You can't do it. It's mob rule."

"We ain't no mob," said Strand "We know who we want. Frisco Fred and those I mentioned."

"As Sheriff I'll fight any mob," said Jack Bell thickly. "It's one thing I won't stand for." Ten years rolled back and he remembered himself in that room behind the store. He thought now that his friend, Peter Strand, had just such a stronghold, with barred windows. "It's the worst thing in the world. Many innocent men have been hanged by vigilantes."

"Innocent? Frisco Ed? Doc Mason? The Mole? Tex Kray? Pah! You cain't go agin us, Jack. We're all your friends. We put you in office. They tried to beat yuh, but we did it."

"You put me in office to enforce the law in the county," said Jack. "I've done it. Town business is the marshal's, until he resigns."

"Or gets murdered," said Peter Strand.

"I'll be in town as soon as I make arrangements here," said Jack.

"We're havin' the meeting," said Strand stubbornly. "I had to warn yuh. We're sidekicks. But Frisco Fred has got to go. Yuh better stay out of it, Jack. People will expect yuh to mind your own business."

"There'll be blood in the streets of Kentley. Women and children will suffer," said Jack tensely. "Innocent people. I'll be in." He swung away to conceal his agitation, leaving his friend sitting his horse alone in the road, rubbing his lantern chin, his eyes puzzled.

Within the neat adobe ranch house he had so painstakingly built and furnished with Lucy Shaw always in his mind, he sat limply on a chair and stared at a blank wall. No one in Kentley knew of his past. He had come here as a young rancher and by hard work and perseverance he had accumulated cattle and land. He was respected by the people who Peter had mentioned—the best people in town. He was Sheriff.

Yet he knew he could not stand by and see a Vigilante Committee do its work. His hands went to his throat as he re-lived the hours he had sweated in that room, waiting death at the hands of such a mob of misguided men. He shook with emotion.

Then he stood up, throwing off the weakness. He packed a carpetbag full of his good city clothing, folding each garment carefully with steady hands. He left instructions with the cooky from the Mexican cowboys who worked for him. He strapped the bag to his saddle, using the same good cross-bred black stallion he had ridden that morning, his best mount.

He donned a belt which he seldom used, a two-gun belt. He saw to his Colt revolvers and shoved extra cartridges for both pistols and rifle into the saddle-bag. He tugged his sombrero down over his eyes and mounted. He took a long, last look at the house. Around his middle was the other belt, the one he had worn when escaping the Vigilantes. Sewed inside it was all his ready cash.

There were deep lines at the corners of his mouth when he rode away from the Bell Ranch. There was a terrible feeling within him that he might never see the familiar scene again.

There was an emptiness. The security he had felt so warmly that morning was gone. In one short conversation with a friend it had been wiped out. He felt like a hunted man again—with no way out.

Yet he was a law officer, going to the

scene of a crime, with all the majesty of the law behind him. He was blameless, he was an elected upholder of law and order, going to the constituency which had put him in office. It was a cruel paradox that this should be a dangerous errand.

HE RODE into town. It was a large town, the county seat, a cattle town, but a farming and banking and business center, too. The flat lands all around were fertile, grass and water were abundant; there were windmills and wire fences in Wind County and the money interests stretched with the shining rails of the railroad, eastward to the marts of the country.

Yet this was the West, and there were Indians still lounging in the plaza, cowboys swashbuckling in the saloons below the tracks, tinhorn gamblers in the garish halls, women in the honkytonks who had seen Dodge and Hayes City and Abilene and were no better for it.

The strong current of the West ran through Kentley, where a Committee could be hatched up overnight to hunt the killer of a marshal of the town; where Frisco Fred File could command a small army of shoulder-men, gun-slingers, ballot-stuffers, common thugs and crooks.

The general idea was that below the tracks anything went. Subject to the town marshal, the scum reigned over by Frisco Fred were allowed license. Marshals being what they were, the license was often great.

He came in through the underworld sector. He hitched his black horse in front of the Diamond Bar. He walked across the boards, his high heels clicking The doors swung and he was inside Frisco Fred File's stronghold, the biggest bar in town, the gambling house with no ceiling and no honesty.

There were a dozen men scattered about, although it was barely past noon. He saw the hard faces of Tex Kray, Nobby Mole, Doc Mason of shotgun infamy. He nodded calmly to one and all. Frisco Fred said, "Howdy Sheriff. Guess you're inquirin' about the marshal, eh? Sad thing, Sheriff. Always liked the ole coot."

Frisco Fred was stout and tall. He wore a Mexican sash, bright red, day and night, around his corpulent middle, and in winter or summer he was without a coat. His trousers were velvet, gaudy, slashed to show white drawers, and he wore Mexican boots. His hair grew down on his cheeks, silky auburn hair, and his skin was smooth and healthy and pink. His mouth was small and red-lipped.

Jack said, "Who shot him, Frisco?"

"Now that I wouldn't know," said the stout man amiably. "I sure would like to know that."

Jack said, "You'd better find out. I'm giving you until midnight to turn up the killer."

"Me?" Frisco rolled his large green eyes. "Sheriff, you must be loco. I'm no lawman. Haw!"

"By tomorrow," said Jack, "you'll know what I mean. If you're right smart you won't wait. You'll turn the man in to me, at the jail, before morning."

Frisco said, "Sheriff, you're jest havin' a li'l joke, I reckon. What's your pleasure—on the house?"

Jack said, "I'm not drinking." He rested his eyes on Doc Mason. That gentleman, reputed to be a decayed member

of a fine Eastern family, was half drunk, his shirt collar open, sagging in a chair near the faro table, leering.

Jack walked across to him, reached out and gathered in some of the loose shirt front. He hoisted Mason to his feet. He said steadily, "You be on the train tonight. It will save a lot of trouble. Be on it, headin' East."

Bloodshot, bleary eyes stared at Jack. Mason said thickly, "You really are insane, Bell. Unhand me! I don't stand for manhandling, sir!"

Jack thrust the man away, so that he staggered. He said, "Do something about it, then! Go for a gun. Run for your handy shotgun. I'll wait. I want you to start something, Mason, understand? I'm askin' you."

Frisco Fred started away from the bar, then stopped. The other gunmen in the place held still, recognizing that the Sheriff was on the prod, biding their time.

Mason held out his hand. It shook like an aspen. He said, "You can see I've been drinking. When I sober up, sir—"

Frisco Fred said softly, "Now, now. The Sheriff, Doc. He's all right. Just a little upset, that's all."

"You asked me," said Mason. "I'll see you, Bell, damn you. No man can maul me. I warned you."

"Good," said Jack. "I'll be looking for you, Mason." He wheeled on the stout proprietor of the Diamond Bar. "That goes for any of you. Maybe you can kill the men they hire for marshal in this town. But I'm taking over until the next one comes in—if I'm allowed to. Come and get me."

Frisco Fred said, "Now, Sheriff, you've got a nice thing of it here. You've got a nice ranch, a job, everything. Why bother with all this? Whyn't you just stay out in the county, like you always did? This ain't rightly your job. I don't understand this, Sheriff."

Jack said tightly, "You'll understand tomorrow. I want Mason out of town, if he did not kill the marshal. If he did, I want him in the jail. I'm leaving it to you, Frisco. I know what you can do and what you can't. If Mason comes for me, I'll kill him like I would a mad dog. Then I'm coming down here below the tracks, and I'm coming loaded. Understand that, Frisco? Do you hear me?"

The stout man moved closer. "I understand what you say, Sheriff. But I'm plumb positive you'll change your mind. Jest take it easy. I know all about the meetin'. The Committee'll never get nowheres."

Jack said, "You'll see where it'll get you, Frisco. The rope will be tight around your neck." He wheeled and walked toward the door.

A man came out of the back room of the Diamond Bar. As Jack paused at the exit and turned to speak, he ducked back.

Jack said, "What I said still goes. Clean your house, Frisco. Spread the word. I mean business—and you know me."

He found his words tasteless on his lips. He backed out, quickly lest they detect the hollowness within him. He mounted the horse heavily and turned toward the other side of the tracks. His heart was pounding.

He had recognized the stranger to Kentley immediately. The man who had come through the back door of the Diamond Bar was "Glenn." It was the man who had tried to steal Jack's money on his flight from the Vigilantes, ten years before.

Chapter III

LAWDOGS CRAWL IN KENTLEY!

THE party was in full progress when Jack Bell, correct in his black trousers and jacket and white shirt with string tie, his low-heeled town boots polished like a mirror, presented himself at the door. Lucy herself opened the fan-lighted portal of the big white house.

She said, "Jack! It's almost nine. Where have you been, dear?"

He said "There was a man murdered, remember, darlin'? I'm the only law officer hereabouts."

She lowered her voice, "I hear that people are taking things into their own hands and won't need an officer, Jack."

He took her hands and pulled her onto the spacious verandah. He said urgently, "You've got to talk to your father. You must try to prevent this vigilance business. It's lawless, dangerous, terrible."

She said, "Why, everyone in town is

on the Committee. Everyone this side of the tracks. Why, I heard you issued an ultimatum yourself today, down at Frisco Fred's."

"I'm an officer, duly elected," said Jack.

But you weren't acting like an officer when you went against that crowd," she said.

"You hear everything, don't you?" Jack scowled. "I had good reason for what I attempted down there. There must be no Vigilance Committee in Kentley. I have wired the Governor to send troops, if necessary, to preserve order. You don't know, Lucy—"

She said, "I don't quite understand—" Her merry smile broke through the seriousness of her mien. "But you must come in and meet our guest. An old business acquaintance of father's—a really distinguished man."

The fiddler had just started another tune. They were dancing in the great ballroom of the Shaw mansion. The elite of Wind County and out-of-town people from as far as El Paso and Albuquerque were there. Jack bowed to a dozen of his friends as Lucy, fingers on his arm, guided him to where her father stood chatting with a tall, immaculately dressed man.

The feeling of unreality, of helplessness and doom sunk deeper into Jack's soul. He stood like a man in a dream as Lucy said, "This is Mr. Perry Wallace—our Sheriff, Jack Bell, sir."

Mayor Sam Shaw, a hearty handsome man with a gray beard, said, "Yes, you two ought to know each other. Perry's a smart dealer, Jack. Buys cattle, grain, railroads, banks and peppermint sticks—at his own price."

Jack shook hands as if in a dream. He heard the well-remembered voice saying smoothly, "Jack Bell? Glad to meet you, sir."

"My pleasure, Mr. Wallace," he said stiffly. It was all unreal. He felt Lucy's fingers, tightening a little, and tried to make himself agreeable. "I have some stock to sell. You might take a look at the herd, Mr. Wallace. A smart buyer would choose my steers. They're prime."

Sam Shaw laughed. "Y'see, Wallace? He's sharp, too! Y'hear what he said?"

Wallace said pleasantly, "I am sure he is. Sheriff, eh? Must be an easy job in this rich section of the country."

Shaw's laugh broke off. He said, "Well, yes and no. Eh, Jack? I want to talk to you private, Jack."

"Yes, sir," said Jack. He bowed to Lucy as Wallace offered his arm to the girl. She arched her brows at him and smiled, a bit ruefully at losing him this quick, perhaps.

He watched them walk away. Wallace had turned a bit gray at the temples, but otherwise he was exactly the same.

It was a stunning coincidence, both Glenn and Wallace appearing, one on each side of the tracks. It was worse that it should happen at this particular time, with the citizenry rising in virtuous indignaton, forming a Committee. He followed the Mayor into the next room and sat down as Shaw closed the doors tight behind them.

"YOU made a mistake today, Jack," said Shaw without preamble, his face hard. "You wired the Governor."

"You-all sure kept a close watch on me," drawled Jack. The bitterness ate his innards.

"Your best friend, Pete Strand, suggested it. To keep you from making mistakes too serious. I can't understand this attitude of yours, Jack."

"I can't understand the Mayor subscribin' to mob rule," said Jack.

"Bah! That old fool Asa Bush and the slick young Vereen turn loose every criminal our marshals arrest. Then the marshal gets killed. What kind of law enforcement is that? Frisco Fred has bought the jewelry store, is trying to buy two more saloons. In a year he will swallow the town. You think we should knuckle under to that fat crook?"

Jack said, "I warned him—"

"We know," said Shaw sharply. "I can't say as how your way was legal, either, making threats—"

"I'm an officer," said Jack. "I ordered a clean-up."

"They'll kill you tonight if we don't protect you," said Shaw. "The Committee—"

Jack was on his feet. "The Committee is illegal. I want none of its bungling help. No lynch mob need watch over me.

Understand that, sir! I'll shoot anyone who interferes with the process of the law. Anyone!"

The Mayor flushed. He said steadily, "I think you've gone loco, Jack. Under the circumstances I can't allow Lucy to make her announcement tonight. I think you understand."

"I couldn't miss," said Jack. "And now, sir, allow me to present my compliments and retire from the company. I have work to do—and I don't want to be watched by citizens aspirin' to be policemen!"

He marched into the ballroom like a soldier under orders. Rand Vereen was there, a slim, fox-faced man with red hair. Old Asa Bush was chortling in senile glee at some remark the young barrister had made. Wallace was still dancing with Lucy.

Just for a moment Jack hesitated. The blonde hair of the girl was a burnished crown and she wore it like a queen. Wallace was smiling down at her with more than polite attention. As Jack watched the man's hand, still white and strong and beautifully moulded, pressed the hand of the girl. She smiled up at the tall handsome stranger.

Jack's middle contracted with real pain. He walked toward the door, and the gay music was a mockery. Peter Strand started away from a group of local folks, but Jack was through and gone before his friend could meet him.

The streets of Kentley, spreading like the spokes of a wheel from the plaza, were dark and somehow ominous tonight. Twice Jack saw patrols of townsmen, sticking together for protection, going the rounds of the right side of the tracks. Woe betide any denizen of the nether region who came across into the respectable section of Kentley this night. The Committee had already inaugurated its regime of terror.

He followed one such group, staying in the darker shadows. They were nervous, inexperienced, armed to the teeth and apt to shoot anything that moved. He shook his head, allowing them to pass him at the plaza where the lights shone from a few residences.

He struck downtown, to the tracks. The shining rails went east and west. The night train was due pretty soon. He watched the telegrapher and the station master at their tasks, searching for a vantage place. He found a pile of crates which hid him and allowed him a view of the platform.

He remained still, without smoking even, his mind plodding along the fevered trail of speculation. Ten years—and it was going up in smoke. Perry Wallace—or Glenn—could tell them why he hated The Committee. He surmised now why Frisco Fred had been so sure that he would remove himself from the scene. Glenn could tell. Glenn could tear down the fabric which he had so carefully woven in Kentley.

For that matter, so could Wallace. He remembered the way the man had looked at Lucy—the man who had saved his life a decade ago and who had greeted him coolly as "Jack Bell" without blinking an eye. What would Wallace do? Jack had an answer for that: Whatever would be good for Wallace.

The man must be wealthy by now. In the old days he had always been richer than need be. A man who loaned and never borrowed, they had said, a man to go to when in trouble—if you had the price. A man who consorted with the nabobs of town—and protected the threatened criminal. Who played both sides of any game, just so there was a profit.

He thought hard about Wallace. What did he owe the man? How far must he go to repay that old favor? Jack's sense of obligation was deeper than the next man's. Whatever Wallace asked of him, that he must give.

HE HEARD the whistle of the train. It was coming across the night. In five minutes it would steam into the station. He had issued his ultimatum and now he must ascertain whether it had been accepted.

Frisco Fred knew too many things. But Frisco Fred wanted no trouble. If what Sam Shaw had said was true, Frisco was about to branch out. The West was full of sagas about men who had started below the tracks, saved their ill-gotten gains, applied their talents to legitimate enterprises and become respected citizens. Frisco, getting ready to turn to the right,

would not want gunfire which could be attributed to him.

The thought burned, spread within Jack's mind. The train was thundering around the last turn. Its noise grew—a huge sound, enveloping all else as the thing of steel and iron thundered on the rails.

Jack moved. Sudden illumination flooded in on him. He ducked, crouching, then spun and moved. He made a stooping circuit of the crates. The train whooshed like a monster devouring the countryside in its fire and thunder.

There was a minor crash of sound. The crates shook beneath the slugs of lead. The blast of fire came from the corner of the train shed. Had Jack not moved, he would have been cut off at the pockets, he knew, by the shotgun load.

His own gun was in his hand. He steadied. The train sighed, the noise dying slowly, with reluctance. The bent figure showed itself, eyes beneath a slouch hat peering, reddening, like animal eyes, trying to see if the deed had been well accomplished.

Jack stood up. He said, "All right, Doc. Let's have the second barrel."

The muzzle started to swing around. Jack fired, once, twice. He jumped for the crates again. The shotgun went off, but the slugs did not come near him now. They went through the roof of the shed. The station master came running, the engineer swung down from the cab, gaping, the few loungers stared. Doc Mason staggered into full view. He seemed to toss the sawed-off shotgun away, as though he loathed the weapon.

Then Doc Mason went down on his knees and his hat fell off. The spotlight of the engine gave him full glory for his last act. He turned his face upward and for a moment the dissipation of the years fell away and he looked like the man he once had been—dignified, full of wisdom. He nodded, waved a hand. He fell forward on his face.

Jack went forward slowly. He had never before killed a man. He was thirty years old—he would be tomorow if he lived—and he had been up and down the frontier for fifteen of those years and never had he been forced to take life. His face was lined and grave as he bent over Doc Mason and studied the dead body.

His hand had never lost skill. The practice with cards, with guns, had paid off. Doc was drilled twice through the middle of his body.

Jack said, "Take him down to the undertaker. If anyone asks, tell them the Sheriff warned Mason and Mason went gunning and got caught."

"That's some shootin', Sheriff. Never knew yuh was quick like thet."

"I never had to be," said Jack grimly. "This is the man who shot the marshal last night, I am pretty sure. Spread that word." He walked away, out of the light. He had no real hope that this episode would satisfy The Committee. He knew too well that once inaugurated, a mob will never cease functioning without a victim of its very own.

He proceeded down along the tracks, crossed at the main street. Frisco Fred's place was wide open. A piano tinkled in a honkytonk across the way. A woman called to him, recognized him and shrilled with laughter. "Oh, it's the handsome Sheriff! Howdy, Sheriff?"

HE TIPPED the brim of his hat. He went on, walking stiff-legged. It was not good to kill any man, yet a feeling of the power of the sixgun came to him then. The Law of the West, by Mister Colt. He had heard it often enough. In his career as sheriff he had been fortunate enough not to wield the power, but now he felt it. He knew the danger of that power.

He turned in at Frisco Fred's Diamond Bar. He stood at the end of the long bar, a slim young man, sober, almost grim. The fat proprietor smirked at him and said, "Howdy, Sheriff. Guess yer lookin' for Doc. He took the train, like you said."

"No," said Jack. "He did not take the train and you know it."

"Somethin' happen to Doc?" The reddish eyebrows went up.

"Lead poisonin'," said Jack. He looked around. Tex Kray was a sunburned rider, a gunman from Texas, a dangerous man. Nobby Mole was city-bred, a bulldoggish thug. Behind them were a dozen hardcases of varying degrees. None of them would move without a sign from Frisco Fred, Jack thought.

He said, "I told you I was headin' this

way. It's eleven. I'm goin' to be right here, waitin' for word that Doc Mason killed the marshal last night—or that some other hombre pulled the trick. Then I want the truth—or I'm closin' you up, Frisco."

The silence was thick. Frisco's eyes bulged, his sideburns went up and down. He managed to stutter, "You—close me up? Sheriff, you have gone completely outa yore mind!"

Jack said, "There's a new law in Kentley. Any place harborin' the criminal classes is agin law and order and can be closed."

"There ain't any such of a law!"

"There wasn't," said Jack gently. "I just made it up tonight."

"You can't do that!"

"There's no marshal," Jack pointed out. "I'm the law. I'm cleanin' up Kentley tonight. Understand that? Tonight."

Frisco Fred came sidling down the bar, his tiny mouth working. He said in low accents, "I tell yuh The Committee won't do anything. I tell yuh we ain't worried about The Committee. I'm joinin' it myself tomorrow!"

Jack nodded his head. "You've already got someone on it. You know too much about it. This ain't The Committee. This is Jack Bell, tellin' you. I'm cleanin' the town tonight. Send the rest of your guns after me. I asked Doc Mason—I'm asking the rest. Come and get me. Because if you miss—I'm getting you, all of you."

He nodded, settling himself at the end of the bar.

Chapter IV

NOBODY BUCKS THE COMMITTEE!

IT WAS nearing midnight. Leaning on the bar Jack thought hopelessly that one man could not hope to do it. He had undoubtedly made a mistake. The denizens of the Diamond were going about their pursuits of fleecing the unwary, poisoning the thirsty with rotgut, dancing with the bedizened dames as though nothing had happened. If anyone mourned Doc Mason, it was not apparent.

There had been no evidence of the man Glenn. Nothing which happened in the bar had escaped the notice of the young Sheriff, and Glenn had not appeared in public. That he was somewhere on the premises Jack suspicioned. Frisco Fred, after his first amazement, had relapsed into sullen defiance. The fat man seemed to be waiting for something, as Jack was waiting.

It was getting to be a battle of nerves and Jack's were in none too good shape. He had much to lose. The money in his belt was enough to get him to a new clime, but not enough for a good start. The ten years which had winged away so fast could easily prove to have been wasted years if the night's events went against him and that knowledge was with him every instant.

The first circumstance occurred outside the Diamond. A man slammed open the doors of the barroom and called, "Sheriff! Come quick. Peter Strand's been hurt. He's askin' for yuh."

Jack recognized the man as Jan Stuppe, a storekeeper. He hesitated, his gaze going around the Diamond. Stony faces met his prying glance. He said to Frisco Fred, "I'll be back. Remember what I said. Your time's about up."

He went on the heels of Stuppe, a bent-shouldered man not too bright. Peter Strand had been good to him through the Kentley years. The lean man had a level head, a ready purse, and shrewd advice for his friends.

Jack said to Stuppe, "What happened?"

"Gunshot. He was leavin' the Mayor's house. Some dirty skunk was behind a tree. Bushwhacked him. Got clean away, too."

"Is it bad?"

"Dr. Summer's workin' on him. In the Shaw house."

Jack increased his pace. He was running when he came up the steps to the big white mansion. Lucy opened the door, her face white, her hands trembling as they sought his.

She said, "Poor Peter. Oh, Jack, those murderers must be caught. Peter was to head the organization—The Committee."

Jack said, "You see? Already needless bloodshed. Please Lucy, talk to your father. Talk to all of them. Urge them to disband The Committee right now."

"You must be wrong, Jack," she said uncertainly. "Oh, I'm so confused."

Jack went into the first floor bedroom where Peter was stretched on white linen. The lean man's eyes were feverish. He said weakly. "Jack, I hear you got Doc Mason. But you didn't get the man they sent after me. The Committee has got to act. They kin clean up. You got to stay out of it, Jack.

"He left no trail," said Peter weakly. "How you gonna get him? How you gonna prove it on him, in court anyway? They'll turn him loose."

Jack said, "You rest easy, Peter. Dr. Summer will take care of you."

Lucy was in the hall; the men were gathered in the ballroom whence the musicians had just departed. The girl said, "Oh, Jack, what will you do? Father is angry with you. Why do you go against your friends, the people?"

Jack interrupted gently, "I am performing my duty. I am going to Judge Bush and ask for a blanket warrant."

She said, "But Jack, what good will it do? Rand Vereen will defend anyone you arrest and the Judge is so weak."

She was not to be turned aside like other women of the day. She was educated, she had a mind of her own. He said wearily, "I'm doin' what I think is right. Stay on my side, darlin', please!"

She cried, "I hope I can!"

HE SAW the guns, then. Even Stuppe had a gun, a fowling piece of doubtful virtue. The others wore revolvers.

The handsome man had a full arsenal of weapons. His eyes were smiling, full of wisdom, satiric, Jack thought. He had become one of The Committee very promptly. Something clicked in the back of Jack's mind as he met the scrutiny of Perry Wallace.

"I'm to take it you-all are usin' force to restrain me?" Jack asked.

"That's the idee," said Shaw. "We're goin' below the tracks. One thousand men will join us. We're cleaning out Kentley tonight."

Jack said, "I've already made a move in that direction myself, gents."

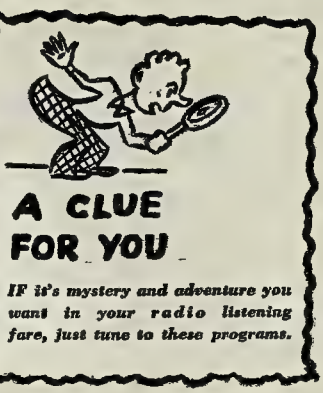
"Our minds are made up," said the Mayor. "You will remain here under guard unless you give us your parole."

"No parole," said Jack flatly, his eyes hard.

Perry Wallace stepped forward, deferentially, smiling his apology at Shaw and the others. He said, "Uh—Sheriff Bell." He emphasized the name just a bit. "May I suggest that you follow a course which you might pursue with honor? There is every reason to believe that the attacker of Peter Strand left town. Supposing you took after him? The chase might lead you out of town for days."

Jack Bell said, "Supposing I make a counter-offer? I will deputize every man in this room. You will all act under my orders. We will search the town, make legal arrests—and deposit the prisoners in the county jail."

Wallace said, "I'm afraid, Sheriff—Bell—that the temper of your townsfolk is aroused beyond that point. I am a stranger here, of course, but having done business with Strand and others, and with your Mayor, I feel a close tie with



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Kentley. I am happy to throw my lot in with The Committee."

Jack said, "That is your decision, sir. I cannot comply with your suggestion. I call upon you all to lay down your arms, in the name of the law!"

Shaw said, "Get him, men!"

They came from behind, George Bradshaw and Cal Crewe, two brawny men, the smithy and the livery stable owner. They seized him, and he could not draw his revolvers.

He fought them as hard as he knew how. At first they tried merely to restrain him and take his guns, but he right-handed Crewe across the room. The powerful Bradshaw was forced to punch hard at his jaw. Jack staggered across the room, off-balance. It was Perry Wallace who lifted his guns while he windmilled back on his toes. Then Bradshaw and Crewe were on him again.

He got his back to the wall and dealt blows which brought blood. Bradshaw shrugged. While Crewe engaged the embattled Sheriff, Bradshaw stepped in from the side and lowered a fist like a small anvil. It clipped Jack on the base of the jaw. He seemed to sink into a bottomless pit, struggling to hold onto the edges, failing, falling.

He did not completely regain consciousness until he was locked in the back room, with a man outside on sentry duty. He held his head for a moment, trying to gather his wits. He dragged himself to the windows and stared into the garden at the south side of the Shaw home. He saw a man move restlessly and knew that the Committee had covered the house completely, determined to keep him in.

George Bradshaw had a terrific punch, he conceded. He rolled his head and found that it would remain on his shoulders. He moved in darkness, as silently as possible. The Committee would require time to form its battalions, he knew. Ten years ago he had learned about Vigilantes. They were slow to move, but terrible in action.

He had but one idea—to stop them at all costs. He knew Frisco Fred would be ready with his minions, armed and determined. He knew too, that Frisco would remain out of it as long as possible, but that the shrewd fat man would never give up his gains without a fight.

WELL, Jack had gains of his own to consider. He had telegraphed the Governor. His skirts were clean enough. He could remain here under guard and let the blundering go on. Innocent people would suffer, inevitably. Frisco Fred's men would make widows and orphans tonight. But his responsibility had ceased when they lugged him into this room, in the house of the Mayor.

The consequences to Shaw and the others he could only guess. Not much had ever been done to vigilantes in the West in other days. There would be an investigation, but the law inevitably bowed up and down the frontier to the power of public opinion—and indictments against a thousand men would be hard to obtain, even for a Lawyer Rand Vereen, defendant of criminals.

He wondered where Vereen and Judge Bush were now, and imagined they would be quietly awaiting results in their homes, barricaded and armed. The Committee would not move against them. There were innocents below the tracks, Mexicans and poor whites, who would get in the way and be harmed, but Vereen and Bush would be safe, north of the tracks.

He paced the room, making no sound. He had to get out. So long as he lived he would never forget those hours, ten years ago, when he had suffered at the hands of vigilantes. For those hours he would always oppose mob violence. He could not remain passive while another Committee went at its careless, violent work.

He heard a tapping as he passed the door to a closet in the room. He went close and listened. The tapping continued. He tried the door of the closet and it was open. There were some light summery clothes hanging inside and a familiar scent came to him. Lucy Shaw. At once from above he heard her whispered call, "Jack! Jack!"

He said, "Yes, darlin'. I'm down here."

She said, "Oh, Jack, they hurt you! I heard them talking."

"No," he said. "I'm all right."

"To keep them from harm—and to save me, too," he said. "I have got to get out, darlin'."

"There are guards—three of them. One inside and two outside."

"If you could distract the one in the

hall," he said eagerly. "And manage to unlock the hall door."

"Jack, you'll do something rash. Against The Committee."

"Yes, I will." He waited tautly for the reply.

After a moment she said, "Jack, must you get out?"

He said rapidly, "I should have told you long ago. Once a Vigilante Committee had me in custody. They were ready to hang me, darlin'. I was innocent. I got away." He almost mentioned Perry Wallace's name, but he did not. "I've got to get out and do what I can, darlin'."

She said, "Jack, I love you, Jack. I love you." Her voice faded.

He let himself into the room and took up a station close to the door. He stayed there, listening until his ears ached. If they thought he was still unconscious they would be relaxed. If he could get into the hall he thought he had a chance. A plan slowly formulated in his mind.

At last he heard Lucy's voice. The man who answered was Tony, a cowboy from one of the ranches nearby. His bashfulness was apparent. Lucy laughed her gay laugh and the cowboy laughed with her. People always laughed with Lucy.

Jack distinctly heard the key click in the lock. He tried the knob and the portal gave under his pressure. He moved it an inch. Tony's back was to him and Lucy was offering a cup of coffee to the guard.

Jack jerked the door wide. One arm went beneath the chin of the cowboy, cutting off all outcry. His knee took Tony off the floor. He swung the hapless guard about, cracking his head against the wall, not too hard he hoped. Tony went limp.

Jack said, "Something to gag him, quick!" He tied the man with his own belt and a cord from the kitchen as Lucy, pallid but steady, handed him a tea towel for a gag.

He paused long enough to sweep her into his arms. He whispered into her ear, "No matter what happens, darlin', I'll always know you were faithful. Faith is a wonderful thing—above everything. I love you!"

He had Tony's gun belt. He strapped it about his lean middle and borrowed the fallen man's hat. It was a tight fit, but he thought it might work. He kissed Lucy once more, listened to her last fearful words, "Jack, you must come back. I know you'll do what's right. But you must live!"

He said, "If I live—I'll be back." Then he was out the front door, boldly walking down the steps. There was no light except the distant lights of Kentley. A man stirred.

"That you, Tony?"

"Yeah. Be right back," he said easily. He strode into the deep shadows beneath trees, ignored the muttered call of the other guard. He knew there was no discipline in mobs, that lack of a superior officer would cause the sentinels to confer about Tony's absence—and he only wanted time to get clear of the Shaw house. They could turn Tony loose any time, now. He was on his way.

He kept to the back lots, circling the plaza. As he had expected, The Committee was gathering its forces at Peter Strand's store. He peered from behind a heap of rubbish and saw Perry Wallace in the van. Shaw, fortunately, was keeping out of sight.

He made another circle. He was trying to spot a spy from below the tracks. He knew Frisco Fred would have one watching The Committee. He came back to the pile of junk in the yard alongside Bradshaw's smithy. Something moved.

He almost went in. Then he saw across the plaza to Strand's store. Torches were burning. It was very bright. Perry Wallace's tall form stood out like a giant among pygmies. He was moving his rifle. The light reflected on the barrel.

The man behind the rubbish heap showed a bull's-eye lantern. The shutter flickered. Jack was not far enough in front to catch the full meaning of the maneuver. He stared from Wallace to the crouching spy. Again the tall man wigwagged his rifle barrel.

The lantern answered. There was no question in Jack's mind. Wallace, member of The Committee, was exchanging signals with the man alongside the smithy. Jack hitched along, moving closer.

The man with the little lantern straightened. He turned, and for one instant, as he blew out the flame, Jack saw his face in the illumination.

It was Glenn.

Chapter V

CHOOSE YOUR OWN WAY—TO DIE!

JACK'S mind was made up as he ran across the tracks, keeping out of sight of the main street. He eased Tony's gun from its holster, shoved it back in, tried a quick draw as he hastened to the rear of Firsco Fred's Diamond Bar. It was a well-balanced weapon in a worn holster. He made sure it was loaded, even threw a sixth cartridge into the empty chamber.

The door was open this night. There had been others through it, Jack knew, carrying messages. He paused, listening. The clatter and jumble of noise which usually filled the place had stilled. In the back room there was absolute silence and emptiness. He went through to the door leading into the bar proper.

He heard the voice of Frisco Fred at once. "They moved too damn fast. I was supposed to get notice."

There was an interruption. A man clumped across the floor. The remembered accents of the man Glenn came plainly to Jack's ears. "He can't stop 'em. We'll have t' fight. Spread out an' take cover. Shoot hell outen 'em. They ain't got organization. They won't stand up to a battle."

Frisco Fred said, "Fight a thousand men? He says that?"

Jack slipped back out of the door. He prowled around the back lots, his excitement mounting, his pulses pounding. At last he found them, behind a shed, two horses, one a pack animal, the other saddled and ready to ride. He nodded and hastened back to the Diamond Bar.

At the second door he drew Tony's revolver. He stepped through in one lithe, swift motion, the gun ready. Frisco Fred, his back to the rear of the place, had no chance. Jack's gun muzzle bored into his fat back.

Into Frisco Fred's ear, Jack said, "So you're goin' to fight the town? And if you win—what? You can only win one battle. The war is lost, Frisco. Once up and at you, the city'll never stop."

Firsco Fred said, "I got my instruct—" He broke off. He snarled, "Yuh can't git away with this, Bell."

"You keep tellin' me that," said Jack equably. Tex Kray and Mole were spreading slowly, inch by inch. The crowd was on edge, ready to blast anything in sight. Jack said, "You're a fool, Frisco. You're bein' sold down the river. Wallace is with The Committee, sure. But Wallace can play either side. If they win, he's in solid with them. If they lose, he'll throw in with you. How much do you owe him?"

Frisco Fred said, "How—how'd you know?"

"You were about t' branch out," said Jack. "You borrowed money. From Wallace. Glenn's his man. Where is Glenn now? Gone back to swap signals with Wallace? Glenn's a thief and a double-crosser."

Frisco Fred said sullenly, "I know a jack pot when I see one. But where do we git off?"

"You're under arrest," said Jack. "The jail is made of brick. Come with me." He lifted his voice. "Stack your guns and knives on the bar. Wrap one of them checkered tablecloths around 'em. Let that Mex dealer carry 'em. I swear they'll never take you outa that jail without a fight. I'll deal back the guns if they get too close."

Frisco said, "You ain't even got deputies. The whole town's agin you and us both."

"And I'm agin you," said Jack grimly. "I ain't tryin' to bamboozle you, Frisco. I'm tellin' you a thousand men can wipe you out and hang you. Come with me and you'll have a chance."

There was a moment when it hung in the balance. None of the crooks in that bar desired any part of jail. But Frisco Fred's mind was working. He knew as Jack knew that there was no chance once the Vigilantes got rolling.

The fat man said, "It's all we kin do. Stack 'em boys. You, Mex, you tote the bundle. Get help from Boze, there."

A swamper and the Mexican helped stack the guns. Tex Kray drawled, "Yuh mean you got to walk the streets without our hawg-legs? Go unarmed through thet mob?"

"We got the back way," said Jack. He collected a couple of the guns, stuck one in his belt, carried two in his hands. "I'll show you. Come on, quick. Vamos!"

HE HAD to keep them moving. He knew the fear that was in them. He could remember the cold sweat of his youthful experience. He held two revolvers, one in each hand. He lined them up and sent them out the back, Frisco Fred leading. He knew the fat man was thinking hard and he wanted to keep it that way. He showed Frisco the way across the rear alleys to the jail. He brought up in the rear, watchful of the Mex and the old swamper who carried the artillery.

The force from below the tracks paraded in single file. They moved sharply, their heads swinging back and forth like wary coyotes. They moved from deep dark into shadowy, ghostly light reflected from the torches of the citizenry which was gathering, working itself into frenzy before the general store.

The jail was across the plaza. There was only one entrance in front. Frisco Fred brought up short and the perspiration stood in beads on his fat face. The bad men—and women—of Kentley huddled, shaking in their boots, unarmed, helpless. Across the square Perry Wallace loomed, a leader of the mob. Bradshaw and Crewe and the others were organizing companies and the tramping of feet was like thunder to listening ears.

There was too much light from the torches. Jack moved fast. He selected a big key and ran to the jail door. It was a heavy oaken door, trebly reinforced and barred with sturdy apparatus designed by Bradshaw himself. It was a moment's work to unlock it and swing it wide.

He said, "All right, Frisco. Herd 'em in. Fast!"

He stood on the walk before the squat, one-storied brick building, the revolvers ready in his hands. The light shone full upon him. The fat man was behind him, and to his credit, he was chivvying his cohorts inside before him, the women first.

A voice shouted, "The sheriff! Look!"

There was silence, more ominous than thunder. Then a voice cried, "There's Frisco! The Sheriff's arrested 'em all!"

"Get 'em. String 'em up!"

"Hang 'em! They kilt the marshal an' Peter Strand!"

The crowd milled, swung and a few men charged. Jack Bell spread his legs, as though he could stop them by sheer physical force. His head lowered, he tossed off the hat with the barrel of one gun. His eyes glinted as he stood there, in plain view of the multitude, his Colts leveled.

His voice rang out, "Don't come too close, friends. I'm packin' twelve cartridges. If you don't kill me quick enough, I'll get a dozen to go with me."

The men in the van slowed. The gun barrels were very steady. Those in the rear shoved, but the foremost stopped, resisting pressure from behind which would put them upon the gun muzzles of the sheriff. They milled like cattle, Jack thought contemptuously, stirred to frenzy, intent on doing harm to suspected killers without trial by jury.

He said, "Is this Kentley?" His voice bit at them. "Is this the West? Where is fair play? A thousand of you against a few—and one guilty man among those few is the only person who should suffer. Get back there. I've arrested thirty people. Carry word to your leaders that if they go below the tracks to burn and kill, I'll arm these thirty and lead them myself. If they attack this jail, I'll do the same. I'm the Law here tonight. Attack me, and you attack the Law."

There seemed to be no ready reply upon the lips of the hasty who had raced across the square. They knew Jack Bell; they had elected him. They hesitated to shoot him down, as they could have with such ease. He saw their indecision and retreated to the steps to the jail. Frisco Fred said, "All in."

He called, "Disperse, friends. Go to your homes. Tomorrow I'll have the prisoners at the bar. By tomorrow I'll have the killer of your marshal and the attacker of Peter Strand!"

He stepped inside and closed the door of the stout jail. The bars fell into place. Frisco Fred sighed and wiped his brow.

There were only a dozen cells. There was some objection among the fiercer spirits, but Jack got them installed behind bars before their shaken nerves grew strong again. Frisco Fred he detained in the office at the front end of the corridor. There was a door between the office and the jail which he closed.

The fat man's hands shook a little. He said, "We ain't outa this yet."

"You might say we're just gettin' into it," Jack nodded.

FRISCO said, "Never thought I'd appreciate a Sheriff arrestin' me. We'd've been shot down like dogs if we stuck it out over yonder. Will they burn down my bar Sheriff?"

"You heard me try to prevent it," said Jack. "There are other dives below the tracks they might attack. But I think they want you alone. I think they blame everything on you. Doc Mason, for instance—did he kill the marshal?"

Frisco Fred hesitated. Then he said, "I could easy throw Doc to yuh. I could say he done it. But, sheriff, we didn't have nothin' agin the marshal. Matter of fact—we was payin' him a leetle to leave us alone."

"None of your men shot Strand?"

"Sheriff, thet would be touchin' off a powder keg whilst you was a-settin' on top of it!" said Frisco earnestly.

"I thought as much." Jack slumped in the chair behind his desk. His head ached. He had it all now. He needed to know very little more. He said, "How long have you known Perry Wallace?"

Frisco's face closed, his eyes narrowed. "I ain't talkin' 'bout Wallace."

"Wallace and Glenn sold you out," said Jack. "Wallace figured on taking over your interests here. It's a syndicate, ain't it? All over the West? Ain't Glenn his man, his contact man?"

Frisco Fred said, "I can't talk about it I tell yuh."

Jack nodded. "You're scared. I happen to know it's been goin' on for ten years. Wallace woulda made a play to get you off, away from the Vigilantes. Then, if you followed instructions, you'd be his, forever." He added, half to himself, "I didn't follow the escape route an' got clean away. But he same back. He'd wreck me now. Mebbe he has wrecked me, along with you, Frisco."

Frisco said, "You mean you was one of 'em? One of Wallace's gang?"

"The Vigilantes had me ten years ago," said Jack. "He got me loose."

"On the Coast?" demanded Frisco.

"The Matt Colley killin'."

Frisco said, "Why, Glenn was there, then. They had—" He stopped short again. He was quite pale. He said. "I better go back an' keep the gang quiet. They'll do what I say, never you fear, Sheriff." He heaved himself to his feet. He looked old and deflated somehow.

The people from below the tracks were very orderly and quiet. Jack closed the door, leaving Frisco with them and returned to his office. The windows were narrow slit-like, opening onto the street. He blew out his lamp and took a station where he could view the plaza.

The crowd had returned to the store across the way. For the moment there seemed to be no activity. Then he saw that men were going among the people, that Perry Wallace, Bradshaw and Crewe were circulating, talking earnestly here and there, to small groups.

That was sinister, he thought. He looked for the Mayor, but could not see him. If Wallace and the others got organized, they could take the jail, of course. A battering ram would sooner or later crash even Bradshaw's fine door.

And, despite his threats, would he dare arm the prisoners and let them kill his neighbors? That was the question which gnawed at his vitals.

Could he allow the door to be stormed without opposition, as Perry Wallace was even now telling the people of Kentley that he must? Could he let the people in his charge be taken out and summarily hanged?

He walked the floor of his office, returning ever to the windows. The crowd was beginning to grumble again. He knew that sound, the determined mutter of men who thought they were right, who believed he was wrong for keeping them from administering justice to killers. It was the most fearful sound in the world to Jack Bell.

He could see through Wallace's scheme now. He could see that long ago Wallace had set him loose for a purpose, had planned to have him robbed and sent penniless into a bondage among the villains who made up the ring which helped escaping criminals from one part of the country to another. Jack had turned on Glenn, broken the circle and unwittingly escaped.

But Wallace had prospered. Now he was exerting his influence on Kentley, a prosperous large town where he had

gained a foothold through Frisco Fred—and legitimate enterprises having to do with Peter Strand and other businessmen. The handsome man was determined to take over. Jack could see it plainly—could see that Wallace would sacrifice Frisco Fred in a moment.

He wondered what Frisco Fred knew which had caused him to blanch and ask for a cell? It had something to do with that day long ago when Jack had been in the toils of The Committee.

It was not important now, Jack told himself. He was faced with the most difficult problem a man could conceive. Death was stalking the town, seconded by the glib Wallace, the mistaken citizens of Kentley. Either way, innocent people would suffer. In the exact middle stood the sheriff.

His own life, he knew, was forfeit, unless he found a way out. If he survived the violence, there were still too many circumstances against his future existence in Wind County. He had gone against public opinion, a fatal error for an elected officer. He had been found by men who knew his past, which would finish him with Sam Shaw—and with Lucy.

All that was left to him was the choice of his end.

Chapter VI

HATE NIGHT IN HANGTOWN!

IN THE plaza, individual voices were ascending above the mutter. "Hang 'em all! The sheriff don't dast give 'em guns. Rush the jail!"

Bradshaw seemed to be counseling patience. Everybody knew there was no food in the jail, that sooner or later starvation would cause surrender. But there was a current running strong for instant action. Someone was fanning the mob spirit.

Jack Bell prowled the office. The noise subsided as Bradshaw climbed a barrel to address the crowd. They listened and in the abatement of sound there came a series of scratching noises, quite close.

Jack instinctively glanced upward at the strong trap-door in the ceiling of his office, leading to the flat roof. Around the outer edge of the roof ran a parapet. No one could get at the inside from there.

But a fire could be started! The thought flashed at once in his mind. He stood, stunned. A fire could drive them all like sheep into the open.

He moved. He placed a ladder beneath the trap-door, ascended it like a monkey, released the bolts which held it in place.

Then he went to the door. Across the way the crowd had its back turned, listening to Bradshaw's earnest oratory. Jack took a long chance, slipping out through the cracked portal, locking it behind him with the big key.

Unnoticed, he slid, around the building. A rope dangled. Someone had lassoed a balustrade of the parapet. Jack seized the rope and went up, hand over hand, his soft boots walking the wall. His guns dangled and he thought he lost the one from his holster, but he went up as quickly as possible.

He gained the low wall and threw one arm over it, dangling. He saw the bent figure of a man, a gun strapped to his back. He threw himself over the parapet and onto the roof.

The man spun at the sound. It was Glenn, his lantern jaw working, his mouth twisted. The evil eyes glared, then Glenn was reaching for a revolver at his belt.

Jack Bell's mind worked like a flash. He leaped. He crashed atop the stooped figure. One hand grasped the barrel of Glenn's gun. The other hammered at Glenn's long jaw. Again and again Jack struck. The revolver went off, but there were other guns being loosed by irresponsible citizens at intervals that night, and the sound meant nothing to the crowd below.

Glenn went limp. Jack worked like a badger, dragging him to the trap door. Lifting the heavy lid, he hauled Glenn over the roof. He bent to unstrap the gun still over the unconscious man's shoulder.

It was a shotgun. Jack handled it. He put it down very gently, grasped Glenn by the shoulders and hung him over the hole in the roof. Without compunction he let loose, dropping the rascal down into the office below.

He reached in, holding the ladder secure. He wriggled down, replacing the lid over the hole, shooting the strong bolts. He descended the ladder. Glenn lay in a huddled heap on the floor.

There was a long knife in Glenn's boot

a derringer up his sleeve. There was a short revolver in his belt. The man was loaded for bear. Stretched unconscious on the floor, the light coming through the window across him, he was evil, thoroughly and utterly bad.

Jack took the shotgun from his own back, studying it. If the inanimate object could only talk, he thought despairingly, it would tell a tale which might give him one chance.

Well, it could not talk. It was up to Jack Bell alone. He cuffed Glenn's hands roughly behind him, hobbled his ankles with a leg chain. He sat and waited. The hardest part was the waiting. He knew how the others felt, huddled in their cells. Kray and Mole, the bad men, the painted women, the Mex dealer and the sodden swamper—two and a half dozen of them with a strange feeling in their throats, a fear of suffocation. Yes, he knew how they felt.

Outside, his own friends, Bradshaw and Crewe and Stuppe and Mayor Sam Shaw, all were brewing the trouble he must try to prevent. He thought once of Lucy, lovely Lucy who had been faithful even to sending him to this certain doom, because she knew he had to go.

Bradshaw, across the plaza, was being shouted down. Eye to the slitted window, Jack could see the mob slowly jelling into one venomous mass. Wallace was shrugging his shoulders, patently averse to stopping them, yet maintaining an appearance of aloofness. Clever, demoniac Wallace, who had turned Jack loose for a reason.

There was a general stir in the crowd. A man said, "Git thet ram and let's go. I ain't standin' here all night. Git thet rope!"

There was always a fool with a rope. He was a half-witted fellow who sometimes helped around Peter Strand's store. He danced in the torch light like a lesser devil, waving the new hemp.

Stalwart youths came with a long pole. Jack recognized them, young men about town, sons of people he knew. His hand fell away from his gun. How could he shoot these people?

YET he must go. He straightened, saying a brief prayer. There was a hammering on the door to the cell corridor. He went to it and called, "I'm not lettin' them in."

Frisco Fred said, "Sheriff, I picked my way outa your cell. I can't stand no more of this. We're like rats in here, cornered."

Jack said, "It was Glenn who killed the marshal, wasn't it?"

Frisco Fred said, "I can't say. You've got to give us guns, sheriff."

Jack said, "Wallace sent Glenn."

"That yuh know," said Frisco Fred. His voice was shaking now. The fear had permeated his bones.

Jack said, "If you'll come out and face the mob with me, and tell them what you know, Frisco, we may make it."

There was silence. Then the fat man moaned, "All right, sheriff. I can't stand this no more."

The blood pounding in him, Jack opened the door. Fat Frisco Fred fell through, quivering. The women were weeping and the others of the motley crew were silent, pale, staring. Jack said, "I won't give in. I promise you."

It meant nothing to them—except that the Sheriff would die first. He locked them in with shaking hands. He gestured to the prone, trussed figure on the floor. Glenn was beginning to stir. He said, "Frisco, I've got him. If you'll talk maybe the crowd will take him and let the rest go." He passed one unsteady hand over his face. He said, "No. I can't let them take him even. But it'll give them pause."

Frisco Fred stammered, "I gotta get out. Gimme a gun. I—I can't stand bein' trapped in a hole."

"No gun," said Jack firmly.

The crowd was forming. He could sense it, through the door, through the walls. A shout went up. He looked out and the young men were advancing with the battering ram.

He said, "We've got to go out and face them. Grab Glenn!"

He knew it was a desperate chance, but blood would be shed in another moment. He could not retreat. He would have to fire upon the youths. He unbolted the door and flung it wide and stood there waiting.

Frisco Fred met the situation. Hoisting the mumbling, cursing Glenn to his feet, the fat man thrust him onto the open,

brick terrace before the jail. The crowd froze, staring. Perry Wallace was on one side, with Bradshaw and Crewe and Stuppe. As the trio appeared, he moved apart.

Jack's voice cut the stunned silence. "Don't move! I've got the killer right here. He was trying to burn down the jail, roast us all. Did you send him to do that, George Bradshaw?"

"Why, no!" said the smithy.

Jack held out the shotgun. He said, "Here's the weapon that got the marshal. I braced Doc Mason and he was drunk enough to try and kill me, but he had *not* killed the marshal. And he couldn't have shot Peter Strand. So who did? Frisco Fred knew it would be like committing suicide. What was the motive behind all this?"

Perry Wallace, standing aside, said sharply. "Maybe I know." The mob swung to this new voice, like a musical instrument being played upon. "This sheriff, this man you call 'Bell,' is a fugitive. His real name is 'Bellaman.' He was about to be hung as a murderer when he escaped. I believe this whole thing was some scheme of his. He saw me, knew I was aware of his past and tried to create a diversion."

It was asinine, but a mob had no brain. Wallace was handsome, persuasive, a leader. Bradshaw and the others were gaping from Wallace to Jack.

Jack cried, "This Glenn is the creature of Perry Wallace! He was sent here to stir up a mess, so that Wallace could rid himself of Frisco Fred and others and take over. Frisco admits he owes money to Wallace!"

"Bellaman, you lie," intoned Wallace. He came forward a step, standing alone. He was very brave. He knew, furthermore, that if Jack shot him the mob would charge, that any act of violence would set them off. "This is your doing, all of it. You are making a grandstand play because you know I have you dead to rights."

"Hang 'em all," the half-wit with the rope screamed.

Wallace said, "Your sheriff is a murderer. He killed Matt Colley, the editor, ten years ago, on the Coast."

They were swaying toward Wallace. Glenn's voice came hoarsely, "Turn me loose. I ain't done anything. He's tryin' to make a goat outa me."

Jack held the shotgun steady, its two muzzles gaping at the crowd. He said, "I've arrested thirty people. I caught this crook burning down your jail. I know he killed the marshal and shot Peter Strand. I intend to defend my prisoners. In the name of the Law I order you to disperse!"

Frisco Fred was breathing hard alongside him. Glenn was trying to move, but Frisco held him tight.

The half-wit chanted, "Hang 'em, hang em, hang 'em."

Perry Wallace said, "You all know me. I am a businessman, not a murderer. Bellaman is the killer. There is nothing to do but—" He drew a revolver.

It was a signal. The animal cry went up from the throats of the crowd. Jack's last moment had come, he thought. He swung the shotgun in a small circle.

AND then the girl came. She wore a long cloak, but was hatless. She came around the corner of the jail, moving with

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dignity. She climbed the steps and stood with the three men who faced the mob.

Silence descended upon the square. The girl said clearly, "Jack is right."

"No. Go home, Lucy."

"Jack is right. Peter Strand got a glimpse of the man who shot him. He just admitted it was not anyone he ever saw below the tracks. He will swear that it was a bent-shouldered, lean man. He says he could recognize the man. Go and get Peter Strand on a stretcher you strong men, and put down that pole!" She stamped her foot at them, suddenly angry. "Go, and hurry!"

Wallace said, "A waste of time. I'll get the girl." He had moved closer. He took a last swinging stride and sought to envelop her waist. His revolver menaced Jack.

Lucy spun away. She threw herself flat against the wall of the jail, crying, "Jack! Look out!"

Jack had guessed the man's intent. He had his finger on the trigger of the shotgun. For a split second he hesitated. The revolver was bearing upon him, Wallace was releasing the hammer.

He threw the shotgun into the face of the handsome man. He bent and dived. His shoulder struck Wallace as the revolver went off.

He felt the searing burn of the bullet along his shoulder. Behind him Frisco Fred gave a cry. Then he was gappling with Wallace. He butted upward, under the man's chin, and his bare head struck jawbone. He grabbed for the gun, got hold of it and wrested it away.

Wallace staggered. He kicked. His boot caught Jack's face driving him backwards.

The mob stood transfixed, watching the battle. Frisco Fred, on his knees, bled from a hole in his chest where Wallace's bullet had sped after grazing the sheriff. Jack staggered, striving for balance.

Frisco Fred reached with weakening grasp. He picked up Wallace's fallen revolver. He had to hold it in both hands.

Wallace produced a derringer from his pocket. He said, "All right, Bellaman. You got away for awhile, but I never allow complete escape." He raised the wicked little weapon.

Frisco, fired one shot. Jack, going forward, was blinded by the blast. He stopped, the blood running down his side, swaying, choking on the black smoke. Frisco Fred slumped to earth.

Wallace lost the derringer. He put out his hands, as though in protest. Then he fell forward, on his face.

Jack held up his hands. He shouted, "It's all over. Wallace and his man Glenn caused all this! It's all over!"

Lucy was bending over Frisco Fred, trying to support his head. The little mouth of the fat man pursed, as though he were in deep thought. He looked up, past Lucy, to Jack Bell. He nodded and said, "You—got—'em stopped, sheriff—Wallace—allus was bad. . . ."

Sam Shaw came from some place, slightly sheepish, Jack thought. Bradshaw and the others were on the verandah of the jail, now, exhorting the awed crowd to disperse. Lucy said, "He's badly hurt, Jack."

"I know I'm finished." Frisco Fred managed a smile. "It ain't as bad as I thought. Leastways I got it in the open. Wallace—" He paused and swallowed hard. Then he said, "Sheriff. I killed Matt Colley. I was in jail for it, an' they had me dead t' rights. Wallace made me do it. He got you out so's they'd think you was guilty and let me go. An' that's what happened. He was smart. Wallace was smart. I wonder if he's waitin' fer me, wherever I'm goin'?" The smile persisted for a moment. Then Frisco Fred was gone.

Jack said bitterly, "He saved me. I wish he could have lived."

Lucy was weeping. She said, "You're hurt, Jack. Wallace shot you."

"It's nothing," he said. "Is Peter all right?"

"Yes," she answered. "He talked to me. He was worried about you."

"I've got to go inside," he said. "I've got to let some of those people out—and put Glenn in a safe place. For when the Law wants him."

"Yes," she said, "I know. I'll help you, Jack. I'll always help you." They went in together, ignoring the Mayor and the others who sought to undo the harm invoked by mob spirit.

THE END

GOOD-BYE DEADWOOD

She saw a big, red-whiskered man in the dark. . . .

By TALMAGE POWELL

On Johnny MaGee's twisting, bloodstained backtrail rode the double-crossing killer who, alive, would track him down to the ends of the earth, and who, dead, would weave a lying hempen noose around his tough young neck!

PART of the tale of Johnny MaGee goes back a right tolerable time for —according to Sheriff Sam Tucker —the life of any man is like a trail through the wilderness, sometimes over the heat and sand of desert, sometimes into the giddying, cold heights of barren mountains, sometimes into valleys that are warm, and green, and filled with goodness. But Sam Tucker admits that the life of Johnny MaGee was almost an exception to this pattern, for it seemed Johnny's trail would never touch the valleys.

Sam Tucker first crossed Johnny's path on a day in early spring. There was

heat in the air, for the summers of the New Mexico territory knew heat like that of a branding iron. The vast and rugged mountains through which Tucker rode were silent, except for the clopping of his horse's hoofs.

He was weary and slumped in the saddle. He had been on the trail many days, hot on the sign of a certain gent who'd been giving him trouble, rustling a few head of beef cattle now and then. The spoor had grown cold, and Sam had lost his man, but in losing one trail, he had picked up another.

He first cut Johnny's sign a dozen miles south of that great stone known as Big Rimrock. Remounting, Sam felt his heart picking up speed. He thought then, at that moment, that he'd picked up the rustlers' trail again. He looked south, where the fresh sign led. A forbidding scene of stark nature in the rough met his gaze—high crags, towering peaks of lava ash; cliffs that fell away sheer for hundreds of feet. It was a land fit only for desolation—or for outlaws on the run.

Sam followed the trail for three hours. He knew he was wearing the roan gelding under him, his own stomach crawled for some decent food; his flesh craved water and his throat whiskey. And he, if he were a sensible man, would turn the gelding and get back to his own stomping grounds, the town of Safford. He kept the roan nosed south.

He found Johnny an hour later. He came upon him quite suddenly, as he rounded a gigantic outcropping of stone. Johnny was lying flat on his face, stretched full length on the seared earth. Beside him stood his horse, reins dangling, a bit of foam on the lips, the head hanging until its muzzle almost touched the ground. The animal looked sad and scrawny, and so did the man.

Sheriff Sam Tucker dismounted, put his gun in its plain holster, and looked down upon the lean man as he aproached him. He thought at first he was too late to do any good. Few men could have stayed in the saddle at all with that bullet hole in the back, high up, almost under the right shoulder blade. Sam saw the sweat and blood the man had lost, and then he saw that the man was young as he turned him over on his back.

The face under Sam's gaze was drawn, too hollow in the cheeks and eye sockets, matted with sweat and dirt and a growth of early beard that still retained its fuzzy appearance. The tight lips of the face, drawn in so that little of the their redness was visible, opened enough to let a groan fall upon the hot air. It was a groan of vast hurt, disillusionment perhaps, and pain, torn from the bottom of the man's guts. The groan brought a faint shudder to Sam, and he had heard some mighty bad groans in his time.

He got his canteen, uncapped it. The water was tepid and smelled sour. He forced the young man's lips open and got a little water down his gullet, but the young, bedraggled man did not regain consciousness.

Sam sat back on his haunches, pushing his hat back from his forehead. Every year Sam's forehead got longer as the hairline receded; the hat looked as if it sat on the back of a wise old skull. Sam considered. There was nothing he could do for his find here, and the ride to Safford might posibly kill him. If it did, Sam shrugged, he'd have to bury the younker on the trail.

As gently as he could, Sam draped the young man on the tired horse that stood nearby. Sam mounted his own bronc, eyed the youngster, and shook his head. Leading the other horse, Sam started down the trail.

If he lives to tell about this ride, Sam thought, he'll have a right to brag about it to his grandchildren.

Johnny MaGee lived to tell. He lived because he had the will to live and was tough like animal hide stripped and dried in the sun. But even living, it was an odds-against him question as to whether or not he'd ever have any grandchildren.

IT WAS several days after old Doc Joyner dug the slug out of Johnny that Johnny became lucid. Johnny lay in the big, wooden bed in the loft of Sam Tucker's house, deep in the grip of fever. Sometimes Johnny thrashed in the bed like a dying man, clutching the sheets, groaning, staring at the ceiling with glazed eyes. For a fact, Johnny MaGee didn't know who he was, where he was, or even if he were alive. Strange ghosts walked in the

fever of his mind, and sometimes he talked, jumbled phrases and words that meant nothing.

One night in his fever, he became a little boy again. Sam Tucker's big Dutch wife was sitting by the bed, and she heard the words that tumbled from Johnny's cracked lips. She heard of a mother who had died, a father who had killed a man and disappeared. And from his ravings, she could see Johnny MaGee—fourteen or fifteen at the time—dressed in levis and patched shirt somebody had given him. Johnny MaGee, riding an old mare that creaked with age, and packing an old .44 that had been used to drive too many staples in fence posts and was as likely to explode as to fire properly. Johnny MaGee and his mare and his .44 setting out to find a new country.

There were a lot of blank spots, and so Sam Tucker's wife didn't get the whole story. Johnny mentioned a man named Hake Swinerly, and somebody called the Deadwood Kid. Johnny was arguing with some man and saying. "I won't be a party to a thing like that! He's an old man, and I don't care how much money he's got, I ain't letting you do that to him!" Then Johnny screamed as if somebody had shot him in the back.

Sam Tucker's wife had been bathing his face all this time and trying to quiet him. Once the scream had torn out of him, Johnny relaxed. He went to sleep, and Sam's wife sat by his bed a good long while. Finally she decided she would say nothing to her husband about what she had heard.

As the days passed, Johnny mended. He was twenty years old and had the recuperative powers of a wild wolf cub. So the day came finally when he opened his eyes and there was sense in them. He felt the bed under him and looked at the rafters over his head, and he wondered where he was. He was powerful hungry.

He listened to the sounds of a woman working downstairs. She was singing in a funny sort of language. Johnny had known a German once, and the language sounded a little like German. Johnny pushed back the patch work quilt and sheet, easing himself out bed. He tried to stand up, and the floor went crazy under him. He grabbed at the bedpost to hang on. He was in somebody's nightshirt, skinny as a scarecrow. His knees knocked together in their weakness. He crawled back on the bed and lay panting.

The woman downstairs came up a little later. She was big, buxom, with apple-red cheeks. She saw Johnny's eyes watching her, and said, "I bet you could eat."

"Yes, m'am."

"You were hurt. My husband found you. Just you rest easy, and everything will be all right."

She went downstairs. Johnny lay on the bed, looking at the rafters, smelling the fine tang of cooking ham and eggs. The smell got so wonderful Johnny groaned, and when Sam's wife brought the food up, he touched it with hands that trembled so hard they almost knocked the eggs off the plate.

Sam Tucker's wife said nothing while he wolfed the food. When he lay back and sighed, she smiled, "You didn't have anything on you to identify you. What should we call you, mister?"

Johnny touched his lips with his tongue; he didn't speak for a moment. Then his eyes fell on a calendar hanging on the wall. There was a picture on the calander of a little boy. The title of the picture was, "Johnny in his new high-button shoes." Under the title in big, black letters, a line of print read: "MaGee's Feeds—For Best Results."

"Johnny, ma'am. Johnny MaGee is the name."

NOW that he had a name and body that was mending, Johnny discovered Trudy Hollaway. She was the daughter of a Safford storekeeper; her pa said fondly that she was a brazen hussy and so all-fired independent that she'd end up an old maid. Several of Safford's young blades would have duelled for her at the snap of her fingers, but she laughed and had a good time, and enjoyed, it seemed, keeping her courtiers on tenerhooks. She was one of those moderns who dampened red crepe paper and painted her cheeks when she went to a barn dance or box supper. But her pa wouldn't get over-anxious about her, and so the gossips of Safford wagged their tongues about them both.

She was at Sam Tucker's house one

day, and saw Johnny MaGee in that period when he was nearer dead than living. She had gone up to bring a bundle of quilt scraps from the loft for Sam's wife. She looked upon the wasted man, gaunt face and something happened to Trudy Hollaway. She had heard of the man in Sam's house, and when she went downstairs she spoke of him.

Sam knocked his pipe out against the stone of the hearth. "Found him like a prospector," Sam grinned, "who's been hunting for silver and stumbled over a gold nugget. But sure as granny, he ain't exactly a gold nugget. He's just whip-leather tough, that's all. If he ever dies, he's certain to go to heaven, because he's so all-fired hard to kill, the devil wouldn't have him!"

"Sam!" his wife muttered.

Sam grinned and went outside to see about his horse. Mrs. Tucker said, "May the saints forgive the language he uses."

Trudy didn't reply. She listened to the feverish rustling of the shuck-filled ticking overhead, and the next day she rode out to help Mrs. Tucker with her quilting.

She was at the Tucker's often after that, and she was there the day after the fever went away from Johnny MaGee. Mrs. Tucker was fixing him a plate of dinner. She turned and looked at the tall girl with the honey-colored hair, and said, "Trudy, would you take his plate up to him? I've got to watch these pies."

Whether or not the pies needed such close attention might have been debatable; but Trudy didn't deign to question an elder woman's statement. She took the steaming plate and mounted the narrow stairs. And when Johnny MaGee saw her for the first time, something came to life in him that had never lived before.

Strength came back to Johnny MaGee like clear, fresh water flowing into the hungry pit of a deep well. He was able to move around the loft; he was able to sit up in bed and carry on a conversation. He never spoke about himself. He was not one given to an over-use of words, anyway, Sam Tucker discovered. A quiet, soft-spoken young man who was thankful for what the Tuckers had done for him.

He worried some about how he would pay them back. Sam Tucker could see that in his face. Tucker had worries on his own mind when he looked at Johnny MaGee, but neither was Tucker a man of many words; Tucker was a man who could wait and see—unhurried, unruffled, unafraid.

Then Johnny MaGee went outside for the first day. Sam Tucker was up at the corral above the house. He watched Johnny walk across the yard. Johnny didn't see him. Sam Tucker watched the young man lift his pale face toward the sky and feel the sun; he watched Johnny MaGee bend and touch the earth with his hands; Sam Tucker pushed his hat to the back of his skull and wondered what course of action Johnny MaGee would pursue in the next few days.

Johnny's horse had fattened some, and he and Trudy Hollaway went riding the next day. They rode down to the creek on the lower side of Sam's place. There was a big willow there and the next day they came back to the willow. Trudy had packed a picnic lunch. They spread it, ate and lay on their back watching clouds laze across the sky.

Johnny thought, everything I've ever wanted is here—but can I stay with it? He thought of Swinerly. Something should be done about the way Swinerly would shoot a man in the back, but somehow Johnny didn't want to do anything about it. He wasn't afraid of Swinerly; he cared nothing for his memory of Swinerly. Yet he didn't hate the man. And that was funny. It was even funnier that he didn't want to hate Swinerly. He didn't believe he could build hate in his heart at this moment no matter how hard he tried. He simply never wanted to see or hear of Swinerly again.

Johnny thought too of a man nicknamed Deadwood, a very handy whittler who could fashion as neat a little figure out of a piece of dead wood as you'd want to see. Carving fantastic and delicate images might be al right to while away the hours of a long trail or around a campfire at night. But that kind of whittling can get to be second nature to man. He'll do it like breathing, Johnny thought. And Johnny knew he'd have to be very careful never to whittle with his pen knife as long as he was in the Safford territory.

Johnny felt Trudy stir beside him; he looked over to catch her watching his face. He said, "I'm thinking I'm strong enough

now to get to work. I owe a big board bill to Sam Tucker and his wife."

"I've talked with father, Johnny. There's room for you in the store."

"Tell him I appreciate it," Johnny grinned, "but I ain't looking for a petticoat connection to a job."

"But it's all fixed, Johnny: I told him you'd—"

"Taking a good bit on yourself, weren't you, Trudy?" He propped himself on his elbow, cupped her chin in his hand. "Trudy, let's get one thing straight at the outset. I'm a maverick who has to do his own thinking. I reckon to get a job, but it'll have to be a job I find myself."

"Yes, Johnny," Trudy said. Then they lay watching the clouds a long time without speaking.

Dusk was begining to mantle the earth when Johnny returned to Sam Tucker's house. Mrs. Tucker was in the kitchen, busy with supper, her face ruddy with heat. Sam was out in the front room, boots off, resting his feet.

Johnny said, "Mrs. Tucker, I guess I'll be leaving here in a day or two. I appreciate all you and Sam have done for me. I know it can't be measured in dollars, but I hope someday soon to be able to pay you back."

"I know you will, Johnny. Where are you planning to go?"

"I'm going to try to get me a job in Safford. I'd like to work in town awhile. I'll be living at Ma Baker's boarding house."

In the front room, Sam Tucker sat back down and eased his hand off his gun butt. At Ma Baker's—well, it was just a good stone's throw from there to the sheriff's office. Sam lighted his pipe and studied the patterns the smoke made.

SAFFORD was a sprawling, growing, raw, sun-baked town. It was a natural hub for movement of men, cattle, and freight to the north and east. There were saloons, gambling, and the Saturday night fist fights in Safford, but essentially it was a town of children and churches. Johnny MaGee got himself a job in a drygoods store. He got himself a room with a single bed and washstand at Ma Baker's. He bought some clothes, and his guns hung on a wooden peg in the loft of Sam Tucker's house. But he never used them.

Johnny MaGee put on weight, and with his flashing smile and new clothes he was a likable-looking, almost handsome young man. He got to know people and made friends, and folks liked to come in Levine's Emporium to trade because Johnny was a pleasant man to trade with.

He saw Trudy Hollaway quite often and she forsook her train of cavaliers who would duel at the snap of her fingers. Her father began to wonder if she would be an old maid after all. The elder Hollaway kept his eye on Johnny and liked what he saw.

Sol Levine kept his eye on Johnny, too. The smattering of education that Johnny's mother had given him in his boyhood and youth had stuck to him. He was good at figures, and had a natural ease in running a business. Getting along in years, Sol shrugged his shoulders and wondered how he'd carried the whole load before Johnny had come along. Johnny made more money, and took a front room at Ma Baker's, a very fine room with a big brass bed and marble-topped bureau.

Another person also kept his eye on Johnny—Sam Tucker. Every morning Sam passed the Emporium, early, like a man who is simply walking down the boardwalk. Every morning Johnny was in there, straightening things, getting ready for the day's business. But Sam Tucker never relaxed his vigil, and when he went in his loft at home, he always looked to make sure Johnny's guns were still on the wooden peg.

Johnny had been in Safford a year now and the town took it for granted that he would marry Trudy Hollaway one of these days soon, buy them a little place, and settle down to raise a family. Johnny had got used to that idea himself and was framing words in his mind to say to Trudy's father, the night the bank was robbed.

The robbery was over and done before Safford realized it had happened, but there was not too much trouble piecing the facts together. Early in the evening, three men had drifted into town by divergent paths. Their shadows melted together in the front yard of old Cyrus Byerly's house.

Cyrus was cashier of the Cattleman's Trust, a quaking little man who lived

alone with his childless wife. He and his wife had just finished their evening meal when there was a knock on the door of the Byerly house. Byerly's wife opened the door. One big shadow fell apart, became the shadows of three men. The men rushed into the house, knocked Mrs. Byerly to the floor, and put a gun to Byerly's temple. He fainted, and they brought him to with a kick in the ribs. They dragged him to his feet, and the gun muzzle ate at his temple once again.

"You're going to open the vault," the leader of the trio stated. He was a big, wide-shouldered, red-whiskered man.

They were almost an hour reaching the dark rear of the bank. They forced Byerly to open the rear door, then the safe. As he turned, the leader of the trio slashed suddenly with a knife. He buried the knife in the old man's throat, and Byerly fell. The trio emptied the safe into a carpet bag, vanished into the darkness behind the bank, and were out of town before anyone knew that any mishap had occurred.

They might have had a longer start had not their assurance been so great. They had seen that the crushing blow on her head had stilled Mrs. Byerly's sing-song voice forever there in her house, and they had supposed that Byerly was dead, on the dark floor of the bank. But with the knife haft scraping the floor planks, breathing blood, the old man dragged himself to the front window. He clutched a brass cuspidor, drew himself up, and struck the window. It gave with a shattering of glass that brought people running.

On his way down to Trudy Hollaway's house, Johnny MaGee was in the crowd that smashed in the front door and gathered about Byerly's wizened, dying form. "Robbery," Byerly whispered. "Three men. Leader a big, red-haired man they called Swinerly."

SWINERLY! Johnny MaGee felt his face blanche and his heart go cold. Of course, Swinerly. Swinerly always, sooner or later, drifted back toward this section of the teritory. And in this section, penniless, what else would Swinerly do but tackle the bank at Safford?

Sam Tucker was kneeling over Byerly's body, but he glanced up and saw Johnny MaGee's face in that moment. He saw Johnny turn and stumble away. Then Sam had to turn his thoughts and action to getting a posse together.

Johnny went back to his fine, front room and sat on the bed in the darkness. He put his face in his hands and thought it over. He wouldn't have needed a posse to find Swinerly, he thought bitterly. Twenty to one Swinerly was holed in Mendozo's shack up in Hoss Canyon. It was the natural place to go, the place Swinerly would have planned this, the place Swinerly would live in until he decided to blow the terirtory again. Whenever the going got hot for Swinerly, there was always Mendozo's cabin.

Maybe, Johnny thought, you could say it's my duty to guide Sam Tucker to the cabin in Hoss Canyon. But if I do that, everything is over for me—Trudy, the job, the feeling of fitting in somewhere for the first time in my life, because the minute Swinerly sees me he'll tell them who I am.

Johnny MaGee lay back across the bed. Maybe Sam would find Swinerly with his posse. Maybe Swinerly would make a break and Sam would kill him. Yeah, and maybe one of these days a stunned world would wake up to find the sun had disappeared.

Johnny dozed fitfully throughout the night. With the coming of dawn, he got up, dressed, and had breakfast. The morning was cool when he went out. He spied Sim Karakus, a smithy. Sim had been in that posse last night.

"Sim," Johnny said. Sim stopped on the boardwalk, turned. He was on his way to work, and sleepy.

"Sim, did you get them last night? The men that robbed the bank?"

"Naw," Sim said in disgust. "Lost their trail by ten o'clock in that rocky country to the west. A durned hard ride, for no good reason atall! I hear tell too that old man Byerly cashed in just before dawn." Shaking his shaggy head, Sim lumbered down the boardwalk.

Johnny MaGee shivered. The morning was not that cool. His eyes burned in his face, and his throat worked as he swallowed. He turned and went to Sol Levine's house. He told Sol he'd like to have a couple of days off. Levine looked

at him, sleep wiped from his eyes, but he didn't ask questions. He said, "Sure, Johnny."

Johnny MaGee went to the livery and saddled his horse. Fifteen minutes later he pulled the animal to a halt in Sam Tucker's front yard. He saw Mrs. Tucker in the side yard, building a fire under her huge black iron wash kettle.

She looked up. "Morning Johnny."

"Howdy, Mrs. Tucker. I came over to get my guns. Figure to do a little hunting. Been in the store a year now without a break, and sort of feel like I need the rest."

"Your guns are where you left them, Johnny."

He disappeared into the house, came out in a few moments. She didn't see the guns, but she knew he was wearing them; she could see the bulges they made under either side of his coat.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Tucker," Johnny wheeled his horse and rode out of the yard. She didn't move for several seconds. She was remembering that name Johnny had mentioned in his delirium so many long months ago—Swinerly. And they had said that the leader of the bank robbing trio was called by that name.

Mrs. Tucker ran toward the corral. She haltered a horse, jammed it between the shays of a buggy, threw it in harness. She mounted the buggy, grasped the reins, and said, "Git, if you ever got, git now!"

BY HIGH noon, Sam Tucker was a worn man. He was hungry, thirsty; the blazing sun directly overhead was merciless, but he didn't pause. His wife had burst into his office right after he'd got there that morning. Johnny fetched his guns, she had said, and she had told him of Swinerly, the name in Johnny's delirium. Sam had promptly saddle and started to ride. He had picked up Johnny's trail half an hour later. From a high bluff, he had seen the streamer of dust behind a lone rider—Johnny. That much had been easy enough. Last night Sam had followed Swinerly westward a spell. If Johnny were going to meet Swinerly, he'd go west, Sam had known. But keeping up with Johnny wasn't easy. He was pushing his mount. He'd gained on Sam, not knowing he was being followed, and now at noon Sam pulled his roan to a halt on the naked side of a barren hill.

Before him was wasteland, a ragged lip of mountains meeting the sultry horizon a million miles away, mountains behind him, all around him. And off down yonder in the distance, a streamer of dust. Sam relaxed in the saddle. It looked mighty like Johnny MaGee was heading for Hoss Canyon.

It was almost three o'clock in the afternoon when Sam Tucker entered Hoss Canyon. The floor of the canyon was wide, vast, strewn with boulders from the size of a pebble to the size of a house. The walls of the canyon were sheer, ragged rock, outlining a strip of blue sky far in the upper distances.

A half hour and Sam came in sight of the shack. It stood beside a trickling, sluggish stream that might have been in one prehistoric day a rushing river. A deep silence lay over the canyon. Sam ground-tied the roan, slipped toward the shack boulder by boulder. He worked his way around the shack and as his angle of view changed, he stopped with a jar. A man was sprawled in the yard before the shack, unmoving, a few flies buzzing about him, lifeless. And the silence ate deeper into Sam Tucker's brain.

Sam moved around the cabin, trying to see in his mind what had happened here. He couldn't. A swarthy man lay near the table. Beside the fireplace lay the hulk of a wide-shouldered, red-whiskered man. Guns lay near both of them, and bullets had gouged splinters out of the cabin here and there. Johnny MaGee was nowhere in evidence, neither was the carpetbag of bank money.

AT EIGHT o'clock that night, Sam Tucker rode back into Safford. He slipped wearily out of the saddle, in front of Ma Baker's rooming house. Ma herself was in a rocking chair on the porch.

"Well, Sam Tucker! I declare, folks have wondered where you been all day."

"Where's Johnny MaGee?" Sam said.

"I reckon," Ma wigwagged her brows, "you'd find him over to the Hollaways' house." The lantern on the table beside Ma flickered, shooting yellow light and shadows over her face.

(Continued on page 130)

"Ride for home, Ray! Forget the North Springs. Believe me, they ain't healthy."

The same rakehell recklessness that had made Jim Corrigan's name a fearsome, flaming frontier legend had also won for him hatred as a mad-dog killer. . . . And then, in one strange powder-blasted instant, he had a last chance to win the respect and friendship of God-fearing cow-folks. . . . If he hadn't been too damned honest to die a hero!

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Tense and Dramatic Novel of a Bounty Hunter

MARSHAL MURDER!

By LEE E. WELLS

Chapter I

BLOOD ON THE DRIFTER'S HANDS

IT MUST have been around nine, I reckon, when Jim Corrigan had his fight with Phin Bledsoe. I didn't see it, but Jim was sparking my sister, Pearl, that time and I heard plenty about it. What kids there were around Teco Springs didn't like Phin because he was just plain mean.

Anyhow, Paw talked about it at supper that night. He looked around the lamp at Sis and pointed his knife at her while his voice got low and hard.

"Jim's always been a hellion, Pearl, and trouble was bound to come. It's best it happened before you and him got in double traces. Maybe Phin won't live, and if he dies, Jim Corrigan's a goner as sure as I'm sitting here."

My eyes got round and I couldn't swallow my food. Pearl didn't say nothing but just sat looking down at her plate and pushed a hunk of potato around with her fork. I could hear the crew out in the cookshack and a horse stomping in the corral.

"Did Jim shoot him?" I asked, and for once Pearl didn't say a word about talking with my mouth full. Paw bobbed his head and looked at me kinda funny, his blue eyes dark all of a sudden.

"You might as well know, Cal," he said. "Corrigan and Phin got in an argument in town—over a card game. Some say Bledsoe went for a gun, some say he didn't, but Jim shot him. He ain't expected to live."

"Jim wouldn't do that les'n Phin Bledsoe—" I started angrily but something in

Paw's face made me shut up. I chewed and thought while Paw ate an' Sis kept pushing that potato around. At last Paw shoved his chair back and started packing his pipe.

"Maybe Phin went for a gun," he said. "But however it was, Jim's in bad trouble. Phin Bledsoe has too many friends around Teco Spings that'll take up the fight for him." He looked at Pearl. "Is he coming out soon?"

"Tonight," she said so low I could barely hear her. Paw puffed on his pipe and then he sighed like it come up from his spurs.

"It's hard, Pearl, but best. Gaming, fighting, sinning, a man's bound to get in trouble and Jim's ripe for it. He's riding wild and I don't want you tangled up in it. You tell him how it is, Pearl. Tonight, without fail."

Sis made a funny sound and suddenly she run from the room, her hands over her face. I stared at the bedroom door for awhile and then looked around at Paw.

"What's ailing her?"

"You leave her alone, Cal. You stay out of sight down at the bunkhouse or the corral when Jim comes. You hear?"

"But I like Jim!"

"No mind about that. Gambling with Satan's pack of cards led to a fight and a killing too, Cal—evil in the sight of the Lord. Jim's got the mark of Cain on him and—" He turned his head and I heard the horse come in the yard. "Vamoose, Cal! It's him."

I GUESS I knew Paw wanted me to keep in the dark out in the yard so Jim Corrigan couldn't see me. I did that right enough but I made enough noise scuffling my boots along that Jim heard me. I saw him stand real still beside his horse and his voice sounded sharp.

"Who's that?"

"Me—Cal."

"Oh," Jim's voice changed and lifted. "Hi, Buck. Roping and riding a lot?"

Jim treated me like I was a man growed and it always gave me a funny, warm feeling in my chest. He called me "Buck" and asked about the weather and the beef, something no one else did. I made sure Paw wasn't around and I went over to Jim.

"Paw said you kilt Phin Bledsoe, Jim. Did he draw a gun on you? Golly, a man'd have to be brave to do something like kill a man!"

Jim roughed up my tow-head with his big hand and I could see his white teeth gleam in the dark as he smiled. But there wasn't any funning in his voice.

"I didn't kill him, and I didn't want to. But sometimes a man can't help what he does when his hand's forced. You forget killing, Buck, and just stick to plain old ranching. Is Pearl inside?"

"Yes, bawling like a calf last I saw her. Jim, reckon you and me will always be friends, no matter what happens?"

I could see him look down at me and his shadow was big against the stars. His hand had been on my shoulder and I felt his fingers tighten.

"Lew Holden's already condemning me," he said in a harsh voice, and I didn't want him to be mad at Paw none. I liked Jim plenty so I didn't want him and Paw to have a gun fight.

"Paw just said what happened to Phin," I protested, and then I saw Paw's shadow against the window as he came to the door. "I gotta run, Jim. I ain't supposed to be—"

I just did have time to run and it wasn't too soon, either. Paw called to Jim and there wasn't much friendliness in his voice. Jim answered civil-like and walked to the house. The door closed on him and Paw, and I didn't know what to do. I wanted to be in the house but I couldn't do that.

I knew what Paw and Pearl and Jim said to each other would be mighty important and I itched to hunker down under one of the windows where I could watch and listen. I would have, too, but I knew Paw'd skin me alive if he caught me. So I went to the bunkhouse and watched the boys play cards.

From time to time I'd go to the door and look at the house. Once I saw Jim walk in front of a window and back again. I hung around the door and finally I saw Jim go out. He walked with long steps and he was already in the saddle and turned toward the gate by the time I reached him.

"Jim!" I called. He turned and looked down at me as I come up to his stirrup.

I could see he was mad clean through and I knew Sis and Paw had something to do with it.

"You'd better get along, Buck," he said. "Lew Holden don't want none of his family to have anything to do with me."

"Aw, Jim! Maybe Paw didn't know Phin pulled a gun—"

"He didn't take time to ask," Jim said. His fist beat on the saddle horn. "He won't let me see Pearl no more. It's my gambling and drinking, he says, and I ain't fit for his daughter."

"Golly! Paw sure is mad!"

Jim straightened and looked north and his voice came in a whisper that sounded real loud somehow. "I ain't staying in Teco Springs. I'm heading out—along the Chisholm Trail, and I ain't coming back until I can make this whole town look up to me and crawl. Bledsoe's kin talk high and mean right now—but wait!"

"Golly! The Chisholm! Jim, could I go with you? I'm nigh growed and can take care of myself."

He chuckled but I didn't see nothing to laugh at. Shucks, I had my pony and lariat, a good saddle and I could swipe a couple of blankets from the bunkhouse. It wouldn't be no trick at all. Later, of course, I could get me a gun belt and Colt in a holster.

"Not this time, Buck," Jim said. He looked at the house for a long time while I dug my boot toe into the dust and squinched my eyes up tight to keep from bawling like a durned kid.

"Buck, I'm mighty sorry I got to ride this trail alone. Maybe in a couple of years you'll have enough cow savvy that you and me can throw in together."

"Think so, Jim."

"Sure! Four-five years at the most! Buck, do you reckon Pearl's really mad at me?"

"It's Paw. Sis was a-crying at the table tonight when Paw talked about Phin Bledsoe."

"Buck, could you do your sidekick a favor?"

As if Jim Corrigan had to ask me that! I'd've done anything for him because there wasn't anyone in the whole country as swell a feller as him. Jim looked back at the house again and I wondered uneasy when Paw'd start looking for me. Jim bent down to me from the saddle.

"Buck, I'm gonna trust you. Can't trust no one else in this blasted town, except Don Pentland. I'm going to write to Pearl, put her letter inside those I write to Don."

I thought sure he was gonna ask me to watch Phin Bledsoe and his kin in case of trouble. Letters to Sis wasn't no shakes and I was disappointed. But I nodded, since it was for Jim.

"Your Paw'd be suspicious if Don come over," he went on, "knowing him and me is friends. But Don could give Pearl's letters to you and she'd get 'em that way, if you was careful."

"I will be, Jim."

"I know you will, Buck. Tell Pearl she can write to me and you'll get them over to Don. He'll know where to send 'em. Is it a deal, Buck? For me?"

"Sis'll get 'em!"

"Good! Well, Buck, I'm riding on. If I don't see you before I get back, take care of yourself. Get school learning and cow savvy and maybe we'll run us a ranch together."

"I sure will, Jim! I'll sure go to school!" I said it without a tremble and Jim lifted his hand in a lazy, friendly "So long."

HE RODE easy out of the gate and all of a sudden I felt like blubbering, and I was mad as sin that them worthless Bledsoes had made a feller like Jim Corrigan leave Teco Springs. Jim could whip 'em all, of course, but he didn't want no more trouble on account of Sis. He'd come back after all them adventures on the Chisholm and we'd start us the biggest, biggest—damn'—ranch in these parts!

The road from our gate took a long drop down the side of the hill and once Jim got beyond the trees I could see him, moving like a dark shadow. I saw him stop and I reckoned he was looking back at the house. I waved but he didn't see me. Then he turned and headed toward the real black line of trees along the main road.

"Cal!" Paw called from the porch and I jumped. "Cal! Where are you?"

He couldn't see me in the shadows. I could stand real still and then go in when he went to the bunkhouse to look for me.

I heard Paw move around the big verandah, then curse under his breath and open the door.

Just as the lamplight streamed over him, the shots ripped out. They sounded like someone had slapped a couple of boards together, again and again, sort of ragged and uneven.

I whirled around and saw the flashes down by the trees. It was Jim and I knew them Bledsoes had set a bushwhack for him. Paw came charging out to the gate and stared out in the darkness. He didn't say a word to me but turned on his heel as the crew came, curious, to the bunkhouse door. I saw Sis standing in the lamplight on the porch.

"Trouble!" Paw bellered. "Saddle up! Them Bledsoes has waylaid Jim Corrigan!"

He went rushing toward the corral and I raced after him. I grabbed a rope to get my pony, but Paw snatched it out of my hands.

"You get to the house. This ain't no place for kids. Stay with Pearl."

When Paw talks deep and hard like that no one augers with him. I walked real slow across the yard and I hadn't quite reached the house when Paw and the crew went ramping out of the yard and down the road.

Sis was back in the house now, standing by the table, her hands clenched tight and her body so stiff it was like she had a poker down her back. I'd never seen her lips so thin, her eyes so round or her face so white. She swallowed and her throat bobbled.

"Was it—Jim?" she asked like she'd forgotten how to talk. I nodded and Sis closed her eyes real tight, opened them again. I hadn't closed the door and both of us looked out through it and down the hill. We couldn't see or hear nothing and the shooting had stopped. But we looked hard just the same and my eyes started watering a little from the strain.

Then we heard Paw and the crew come back. Pearl took a step back and sat down slow in a chair like she hardly knew what she was doing. She'd clasped her hands and the backs of them was ridged with tendon, the knuckles white. We heard the crew go to the corral and a lot of low talk that seemed like it would never end.

Then Paw came in, looked funny at us, and closed the door. Sis said nothing and neither did I, but my eyes took the place of my tongue. Paw pitched his hat on the cowhorn rack.

"One dead and two shot up pretty bad—all Bledsoes. They must've trailed Corrigan out here and waited for him."

"Jim?" Sis asked. Paw's face got deep creases.

"Never saw him. Lanny Bledsoe says none of 'em hit Jim, but he handled a Colt like a renegade. I tell you, Pearl, you're better off, though it's hard right now. Corrigan has tasted blood and he'll drift. He'll be a wanderer upon the face of the earth and every man's hand will be against him."

"Jim won't let no man put his hand on him," I said. Paw jerked around.

"Cal, you get to bed!"

Chapter II

RENEGADE'S RETURN

IT WAS five years before Jim Corrigan come back to Teco Springs, and a lot of things can happen in five years. I got taller and my tow-head began to change to Paw's sandy brown. In that time Paw built up his ranch and brought out a couple of small men so that the Lew Holden Diamond H brand was known clean up into Kansas. Each year our beef went up the trail and it was always strictly a Diamond H herd after Ed Glaser come to work for us.

Ever' time the crew come back from the trail, I'd get excited, for there'd always be some news of Jim Corrigan. First we heard, he was buying beef up in Kansas for a packing house. There wasn't much about him until the following year. He'd become deputy marshal of Abilene, and it made my chest swell right up to hear what was said about him.

Jim Corrigan cleaned up that town! There was the regular marshal and other deputies, of course, but I knew that it was Jim that did all the work, notching his guns and chasing the badmen plumb out of the state. Next we heard he'd moved to Dodge, still fighting for the law. That time I knew it was Wyatt Earp helped Jim—it couldn't have been no other way.

Next we heard, Jim was somewhere else, head lawdog this time.

Whatever you heard, Jim Corrigan wasn't hurt in the telling. I lost count of the men he was supposed to've killed and the whole train loads of murderers, gamblers and such he run out. It got so "law fighting" and Jim Corrigan meant the same thing.

Jim had said he'd come back and I knew he would, and I got to thinking how it'd be to call him "partner." I hadn't forgotten a word he'd said that night when the Bledsoes bushwhacked him. But I never said much about him around Paw and Sis—they didn't like it none.

The first year, I'd bring letters to Sis and take hers to Don Pentland. Then the letters got further apart and finally there wasn't no need at all to ride over to Pentland's Double Bar O. Sis never said nothing and she bawled me out harsh once when I asked why Jim stopped writing. Finally I knew he was so busy with the law he didn't have time to be writing to a girl, anyway.

The biggest change of all was Phin Bledsoe. He finally got up and around but he limped some from Jim's bullet. Phin talked big for awhile but you could tell his heart wasn't in it. That fight had changed him and, when a shouting sky-pilot came around about a year later, Phin got religion.

It wasn't no fooling, either, and it changed Phin complete. He broke with his worthless family and went off somewhere to a preacher school. He come back a parson and he built a little frame church in Teco Springs. He told his kin either to get saved or leave him alone, and folks said Phin was a right nice sort. I went to church once with Paw and Sis, and Phin could surely preach. Dogged if I didn't begin to like him, too, when he took my hand like a growed man and apologized for all the mean things he used to do to us kids.

Like I said, Ed Glaser came to work for us and to trail-herd our beef to Kansas. He was about Jim's size and age, fair where Jim was dark, serious where Jim'd be laughing and cutting up. But he was a top hand and Paw thought a lot of him, enough so he said it was all right when Ed asked could be spark Sis.

Ed did all the courting, though. Sis'd go with him here and there—the church, the weekly dance at Teco Springs and to the neighbors, but that was about all. I had an idea she still thought about Jim Corrigan, and no one else could take his place. Shucks, I'd've been that way if I was a girl.

When I was in the seventh grade, the teacher quit for to hunt gold up in Colorado and there wasn't no one to take his place. Paw decided it was time I should learn all about punching then, and Paw had funny ideas about teaching.

"I'll either be too hard with you, Cal, or too easy. Either way's no good. Pentland said you could make a hand on his Double Bar O, and you'll feel like you're making your own way over there. You ride over come Monday morning."

I'LL never forget when Jim Corrigan come back. I'd just turned fourteen the week before. My voice'd sound like it had hair on its chest one minute and squeak like a fiddle string the next. Bo Sawyer and me had fought some behind the saddle shop because I'd asked his girl to go with me to the church picnic, and I had a shiner I was some proud of, seeing's Bo was in worse shape. I'd plumb forgot about the girl, too, after the fight.

I was white-washing the yard fence and whistling through my teeth when I saw the rider come up the trail from the main road. I paid him no mind for a minute and then I thought something about him looked familiar. I squinted against the sun then and the closer he come, the more sure I was I knew him.

He was almost to the gate, a tall man with a big black hat and black shirt. He had conchas on his saddle and he wore a pair of crossed gun belts. It was the set of his shoulders and the way they swung loose as he rode that told me who he was. I dropped the brush on the ground and went racing toward the gate.

"Jim! Jim!"

His head swiveled and his right hand made a quick, jerking move back toward his hip, but he caught himself. He watched me come running and his black eyes never wavered and never got warm.

"Who are you?" he asked when I stopped beside his horse. I felt something

sort of break in my chest and I stared at him, not believing my ears. Shucks, he couldn't have forgotten in a measly five years!

"Why, Jim, you remember Cal Holden? Buck?"

Then his face lighted and he smiled. But it was like he wasn't used to it. He was leaned down now, and his face looked like an Indian's and a hawk's all at the same time. There were deep lines between his eyes and a hard look to them that I didn't remember from five years back.

"Buck? Of course! You've growed considerable. What you doing at Don's place?"

"Making a hand," I answered proudly and I threw my head back, "so's I'll hold my share when you and me start that ranch."

"Ranch! Huh? Oh! sure, the ranch—"

Just then Don Pentland come out of the house and he shouted clean to the gate. "Jim Corrigan, you old son of a gun! By God, man! Light and rest!"

I walked beside his horse up to the house. Jim dismounted and shook hands with Don. He was grinning but I noticed his eyes was never still, moving and searching like he expected trouble to jump from around almost any corner.

"I'll take care of your horse, Jim," I said, "and turn him into the corral."

"No kid can handle this horse," Jim said short-like and I was so surprised I could only stare at him. It was the first time he'd ever called me "kid" like we wasn't the same size and all. He led the horse away, Don Pentland going with him.

I stood there, watching their backs and kicking a hole into the ground. Things were wrong and I didn't like it. Finally I went back to the fence and cleaned the dirt off the brush. I saw Don and Jim walk back to the house, still talking—or anyhow Don was. Just as they got to the porch steps, Jim stopped and looked all around, real slow.

"Ain't changed much," Don said and I knew he was aching for Jim to say something about the way the ranch had growed. Jim's lips twisted up.

"That's right. It's still the same flea-bitten country it always was. I reckon the same damn' sticks-in-the-mud run it, too," he said, looking around the place.

"Well, I wouldn't exactly say that, Jim—"

"But I do. Best thing I ever did was get out of this hole. If I wasn't riding through to a job in Arizona, I'd never come near."

Don didn't say anything and the two of them went in the house. I started to work on the fence again, moving the brush in slow strokes and sometimes stopping while I stared at the low hills over toward the west. It just didn't sound like the old Jim, and he didn't act like him.

But he'd seen a lot and done a lot, and maybe I'd be different, too. I began to whistle a little and then more and more. Once Jim met the folks of Teco Springs again and saw Sis he'd be like always.

THE next day I was standing up to ride home for a few hours when Jim come out to the corral. He roped his own horse, a big black animal with a mean eye. Jim moved smooth as silk when he handled the rope and the saddle, and I could tell he was mighty fast with his hands and feet—lightning fast. Finally he swung up into the saddle and gave me that quick grin that never quite reached his eyes.

"Don says you're riding home, Kid. I'll tag along."

"Sure, Jim. Sis—and the folks—will be glad to see you."

"I bet," he said, short.

We rode out of the yard together and I kept watching him out of the corner of my eye. He rode like him and that black hellion was part of one another, and never once did he stop looking all around like he expected trouble. He didn't act scared at all, just as though he wasn't real comfortable unless trouble come along and he could whip it down. After a couple of miles, I cleared my throat.

"We been hearing a lot about you, Jim. Golly! it must've been something to clean up all them wild towns!"

"It's a way to make a living," he said, "if a man's got guts enough. Better'n growing moss on you in a place like this."

Shucks, I couldn't see much wrong with Teco Springs. It wasn't big like Abilene and Dodge, and didn't have the excitement and the gun shooting. But the peo-

ple was nice and you knew everyone and you felt you belonged. Jim suddenly looked hard at me and grinned.

"Who gave you the shiner, Kid?" I told him how it was. He was just half listening, I could tell, and when I finished he shook his head a little.

"The girl wasn't worth it, Kid. 'Less you watch yourself, you'll end up stuck here all the rest of your life. You forget the girls and head out when you're old enough."

It made me mad as blazes inside but I didn't say nothing. I kept mixing up this gent with the Jim Corrigan of five years back, and I'd never auger with *that* Jim anyhow. He was a gent to tie to.

It must've been five miles before either of us said any more. We were pretty close to the Diamond H line then and we hadn't met anyone along the road. Jim hooked the reins over the horn and pulled out tobacco and paper. He lit up.

"Pearl's married, I reckon."

"Golly, no!" The question surprised me. "Pearl ain't set her eye on no man yet, though Ed Glaser's been courting her a couple of years now."

"Who's Ed Glaser?"

I told him and then went on about the Bledsoes and how Phin had changed and broke with his folks. I told him how the town had growed a little and new folks had come in; how the old Currycomb had been bought by Ray Miller, a loud-mouthed, mean-eyed man who pushed Don Pentland hard and was augering with him over some springs up on the north boundary. Jim listened, cocked his brow like he didn't believe it about Phin and looked almost pleased when I told him about Miller. Finally I run out complete.

"You think Pearl and Ed'll get married?" he asked.

"I dunno," I said after awhile. "Ed's a mighty fine man and everyone likes him. I reckon a girl *has* to get married sometime."

"Yes, I reckon she does," Jim said and I could tell he didn't want to talk any more. It was a lot different than it used to be and I wanted bad to tell him he'd changed considerable. Maybe if he'd called me Buck, I would've, man to man. But he didn't think of me that way any more and a kid don't have no right to tell his elders what he thinks is wrong with 'em.

We finally come to the home ranch and I was sure glad to see it. Paw was sitting on the verandah, his boots up on the rail and smoking his pipe. Ed Glaser was sitting on the steps and they stopped talking when we rode in the gate. I couldn't see Sis nowhere about. Paw stood up as we drew rein and I jumped out of the saddle.

"It's Jim, Paw," I said. "He's back."

Paw walked down the steps and extended his hand like nothing had happened five years gone. Jim shock hands but I could tell he was waiting for Paw to say something. His eyes would dart to the door, then swing over to Ed with a cool, weighing look.

"Glad to see you, Jim. I hope you're home for good."

"Riding through to another law job, Lew, and thought I'd look things over."

Paw introduced him to Ed, who had heard about him, all right. I could tell it in the way he looked surprised and then a little embarrassed, like Jim was a great man and Ed was just a puncher. I sort of felt the same way but somehow I didn't like to see Ed show it. Jim kept looking at the house and Paw said, quiet:

"Pearl will be glad to see you. I'll get her."

He went inside, leaving the two men standing by the steps, me a little to one side. Jim looked around the yard and then directly at Ed Glaser. He smiled but it was the sort of a grin that made shivers chase up my back. He stood loose and easy, his hands on his hips just above them ivory handled Colts.

"I hear you and Pearl have been courting."

"That's right," Ed said and his jaw tightened a little. "I figure to ask her to marry me some time."

"So now! Well, luck to you. But you'll have to hold up your courting until I get gone. I plan to see a lot of Pearl while I'm here."

Ed's face got beet red and his nose pinched in funny and tight. I saw his fists clench and his shoulders come up toward his neck as his muscles knotted. Jim still stood easy, hands on his hips, grinning like an Apache. I felt something knot in my stomach. Jim Corrigan was hoping

Ed would fight! Fair longing for it! I was mighty glad when Sis come out and Jim walked by Ed like he wasn't even there, he'd forgotten him that complete.

Chapter III

WALK ON 'EM HARD

I NEVER knowed anyone to change so quick as Sis did. You'd think that her eyes got lively and her smiles come back just because Jim Corrigan sat across the table from her that night. She'd worked for hours cooking that dinner. It was almost like old times, even to Paw not saying much and acting toward Jim as he always did.

Only Ed Glaser was different. He fiddled with his food a lot and didn't eat much. He'd look at Sis kind of funny and then hard and tough at Jim, once or twice looking over to Paw as if he asked a silent question. Finally Paw eased back a little from the table.

"So you're not staying long, Jim?"

"That's my plan," Jim said. He smiled at Pearl then and shook his head. "But I could change my mind. I've made enough I don't have to take that job in Arizona."

"Then perhaps you'll settle down here?" Paw asked and I looked up right quick. If Jim decided to do that, then maybe the two of us could swing that ranch deal. Jim rolled a cigarette and I saw he secretly watched Ed Glaser.

"Settle down? Me? Not Jim Corrigan, and not in Teco Springs! There's too much doing elsewhere."

"Roaming around don't get a man nowhere," Paw said flatly. Jim chuckled and leaned forward.

"Now that's where you're wrong, Lew. And you always have been. I've been gone—what?—five years? I'm further right now than if I'd stayed here for twenty. I've drawn good pay and I've picked up a whole bunch of reward money for renegades the law wanted. If I'd stayed here, I wouldn't be no better off than—than Ed there, working for someone else and slaving his guts out for maybe sixty a month."

It was like someone had set a cake of ice on the table. Paw's face grew dark and set. Ed gripped the edge of the table and looked quick at Sis. She watched Jim, her eyes soft, and I don't believe she heard half what he said. Just the sound of his voice seemed good enough for her.

Jim knew what he'd done, and dogged if he wasn't pleased with himself! He rolled a cigarette quietly while Ed boiled inside. Paw was sorting his thoughts and he was quiet mad at Jim for crossing him like that and laughing off all Paw figured was law and gospel. I could see he didn't know how to handle this new Jim Corrigan. He was like me, with the memory of them shootings and killings up in Abilene and Dodge and all about. Jim was a hero all right, but it was because he always wore the law badge. Even so, there was no telling what he'd do if he got his dander up good.

But Paw wasn't scared, or if he was, he didn't care. He had his say to make and he worded it slow, meeting Jim's hard glance with a steady look of his own.

"More money, perhaps. But it's money with human blood on it—Cain's sin defiling it. I'm thankful Pearl's got Ed here, for no daughter of mine will take up with a wandering, foot-loose bounty hunter."

Jim's eyes narrowed to slits and all of a sudden I got real scared for Paw. Ed felt it, too, for he pushed back from the table a little like he was ready to fight. Sis was listening now and she didn't like what she'd heard. Suddenly Jim laughed and that crackling silence was all gone.

"Sure now! This sounds like a church. Kid, you ready to ride back to Don's? It's getting on." He arose and thanked Sis right fine for the good supper. Then he took her arm and placed it in his own. "It'll be nice down by the gate and the Kid won't look at all."

"Pearl!" Paw said like a whip. Jim turned, still smiling.

"Lew, have you figured Pearl's a woman growed now with a mind of her own and a right to figure things for herself? Time passes, Lew, and a man makes mistakes if he don't fit himself to it. Let's go look at that gate, Pearl."

SIS didn't know what to do, but Jim had control of things. He led her out the door while Paw and Ed just sat there staring whopper-jawed with surprise. I jumped up, grabbed my hat and lit out

toward the corral, that funny knot in the pit of my stomach again. Golly!—if Paw and Ed started a fight and Jim shot 'em—! I just wouldn't let myself think that way, and in no time at all I was down at the gate, urging Jim to ride.

Jim was holding Sis and he kissed her. Just as I come up, she pulled free and, though it was dark now, I could see that she looked up at him, quiet and somehow tied-up inside herself.

"Jim, I don't know—"

"You wanted me to kiss you," he said easily. I saw Sis nod and neither of them noticed I was around.

"Yes, Jim, I wanted your kiss. I thought how it would be, all these years you've been gone. But this—" She stopped and then her voice sank low and I had to strain to hear it. "I feel like—like a cantina girl, Jim. You learned too much up north. Good night."

She turned and ran back to the house. Jim watched her go and then stared up at me. "I'll be damned!" he breathed like something had happened he didn't understand.

He swung up onto that black horse and we rode away side by side. Once I looked back at the warm glow of the lamp light in the windows. I felt like there was a lot done and said that night that I didn't quite savvy; that maybe for all my thinking I was still a kid and there was some grown-up stuff I didn't understand. But I was certain of one thing.

"Jim, you sure rolled spurs on Ed Glaser and he's fighting mad. I could see it. Paw would'nt have took much more, either."

"So?" he asked, cold and distant. I felt miserable and a little scared, but I had to say it.

"Doggone it, Jim! Why do you go around trying to fight folks? What's Ed do you should rile him? And Paw was ready to be friendly like before, but you—sassed him."

Jim chuckled and it was a mean sound. "So I did! Reckon he knows how I felt five years gone when he made Pearl—? Oh, hell, forget it! But I'll give you some good advice, Kid, if you want it."

"All right, Jim," I said, not really caring.

"Everything you want in this world you got to fight for—fight for like hell. There's always some son who'll take it away from you or keep you from getting where you want to be. Soft talking won't help none. It's a hard fist, or a fast gun, or a quick brain that gets you places. If someone stands in your way, beat him down if you can."

"Like Ed Glaser?"

"Like Ed. If you want to be top dog, act like it and think like it, and make people believe you are. Take what you want and to hell with all the rest."

He made it sound mighty big, but I reckon I had too much of the easy ways of Teco Springs in me to think much of it, though when Jim Corrigan told you something it was generally right.

We come to the Double Bar O and, late as it was, there was a light in the house. When we rode in the yard, we saw four-five horses, and cigarettes glowed near the porch. A man came up as we dismounted. He was one of Miller's hard Currycomb riders.

"Who are you?" he asked in a tone that made me mad just to hear it.

"Jim Corrigan, and what do you make of it?"

"Nothing," the man said and took a step back. "The Boss is inside talking and don't want no one butting in." They all knew Jim Corrigan and none of them wanted any trouble.

"A man don't always get what he wants," Jim said. "Kid, let's stick our noses in Currycomb business."

It scared me, him talking so big before this bunch of tough hands. I couldn't trust my voice so I just followed him up to the porch. Three men stood there, of half a mind to block our way, but Jim walked right up to 'em, his hands brushing his guns as they swung with his stride.

At the last minute the three stepped aside and we went past 'em. My back crawled up between my shoulder blades, thinking of them behind us. Jim opened the door and stepped in.

DON PENTLAND stood to one side of the table and Ray Miller on the other. Don's jaw was clamped tight and it was plain that he and Miller had said hard words back and forth. Ray Miller was a big, stocky man with an undershot jaw and

practically no neck at all. He reminded me of a mean bulldog. He half turned as we come in and the lamp light gleamed dully on the blue steel of the Colt in his holster. He squinted hard at Jim and then at me, and his voice was like a file across sandpaper.

"Get out. This is private. Who let you in anyhow?"

"I walked in," Jim said, "and I intend to stay."

"Miller," Pentland said, his lips barely moving, "says he's taking over the north springs and he's driving off every man or beef that comes near."

Jim smiled and nodded slightly. "It's a good try, anyhow, but he ain't got the men to back it. They bluff easy. Stay away from the springs, Miller, or I'll personally come after you."

Miller sort of dropped his head between his shoulders and glared at Jim. "You're riding your rep, Corrigan, and I don't scare."

Jim moved close to the table, standing loose and easy. He moved so fast that Miller didn't have a chance. He grabbed the man's shirt and his right fist came up in a blur. Next thing I knew, Miller sailed backwards and he hit the wall so hard the whole house shook.

Ray wasn't slow himself. He shook his head to clear it and then his hand slashed down for his Colt. But, shucks, he didn't get that gun half out of the holster before Jim's Colts pointed right at Miller's chest. It was so blamed fast I was goggle-eyed.

"Bring it on out, Ray," Jim said, "but slow and easy."

Miller acted like he had been frozen against the wall. A trickle of blood come from his nose and he looked like a big bear that had been cornered. Then very slowly he freed his gun and, at Jim's sign, put it on the table.

"You and your boys better ride for home, Ray," Jim said, "and forget the north springs. They won't be healthy."

"You can't fight all the men I can put up there," Miller growled.

"Ray, there's no one around Teco Springs can put me down, things being even. If you put too many guns up there, I can always call on you personal. Now git, and take your scum with you."

Jim backed to the door and threw it open, made a jerky sign with one gun barrel. Miller took a deep breath and marched out, Jim swinging in right behind him.

The Currycomb boys acted like they couldn't believe what their eyes saw. Miller growled an order and Jim gave them all a warning to leave Pentland's spread alone. I stood on the porch watching him and right then I sure wished I had Jim's nerve. He was a real man, all through.

When Miller and his men rode off, Jim came back in the house and grinned at Pentland. "That took care of Currycomb. They won't bother you none so long as I'm around."

Pentland sat down and rubbed his hand along his jaw. "I ain't so sure, Jim. You sunk spurs in Miller's hide right in front of his men, and he can't let that pass. Besides, once you're gone Miller will start again."

"I'll hang around," Jim said. "There's no hurry."

"That only puts it off," Pentland said. "There was a chance to settle things peaceful, but now—"

"Oh, hell!" Jim said angrily. "You're like the rest of the spineless bunch around here!"

He went to his room, slamming the door behind him, and after awhile I went out to the bunkhouse.

Chapter IV

HIT THE TRAIL—CURLY WOLF!

JIM got over his mad and we didn't have any trouble about the springs. Currycomb stayed close to its range and we stayed to ours. Jim boasted Miller was scared, but Don said he was just waiting his time. I was all for Jim, but I still had a funny feeling Don was right, since he knowed Miller a heap better than Jim.

There was trouble building up other ways, too, and it worried me. It was all Jim's fault and there wasn't no way I could twist things to excuse him, hard as I tried. I come to see that there wasn't much difference between Jim and some of Miller's tough boys if I didn't let the past get me all confused with the old Jim Corrigan.

All of us rode to Teco one Saturday,

Jim with the crew. I was kinda young for my size so I couldn't go to the saloon. But I bought a new neckerchief and made a dicker with Sol Ecker to pay a little every month on a brand new saddle he was making. Then I went to the store and sat on a cracker box, listening to the old timers tell about the Comanche raids on the town. Along about nine Phin Bledsoe came in, still walking a little twisted from Jim's bullet like he would the rest of his life.

Someone said, "Jim Corrigan's in town, Phin," and there was a deep silence for a minute. Phin smiled and nodded.

"I heard. I intend to invite him to the camp meeting services come Monday night." Just then a man stuck his head in the door, his eyes wide.

"There's a hell of a fight over at the saloon. Corrigan and Ed Glaser tangled."

Phin hurried out, the rest of us right behind him. There was a crowd standing before the saloon and when I reached it, the fight had worked its way out to the porch and then the street. I squeezed and worked my way through the crowd.

Ed Glaser! I kept thinking. What will Sis do? Golly, I liked Ed and Jim was top man with me, and I didn't want 'em to be fighting! I finally pushed through and there was Ed and Jim before me.

Jim was fast as lightning and he learned a lot about fighting up north. The lamp fell on Ed's face and it was covered with blood. One eye was shut and his nose looked like it was busted, but he fought right back, trying to give as much as he took.

Jim was just too much for him, and I hardly knew him. He looked mean and savage and there was a twisted grin on his lips that showed he was enjoying himself. He slammed his fists home as though he liked the shock of them.

Ed staggered and swung wild. Half the time his guard was down, and Jim could've ended the fight any minute. I wondered why he didn't, until I suddenly understood that Jim Corrigan was deliberately cutting Ed up. He pounded at Ed's bloody nose, then suddenly slammed his fist in the man's stomach. Ed doubled over and Jim was ready for it. His fist had a meaty sound as it landed squarely in Ed's face.

I was sick all of a sudden and I couldn't get enough air. I tried to push away from the fight but the crowd was too tight-packed. I squinched my eyes tight but I could still hear Ed's whistling breath, the shuffle of boots and the dull thud when Jim landed a fist.

This wasn't Jim Corrigan! This wasn't the man we'd all heard about—a hero! He was mean clear through, selfish, hard, who'd shoot you or beat you to ribbons just because he liked to. Paw was right and had been right all along, but I'd been too—damn'—blind to see it.

The crowd had stopped yelling a long time ago and they were of half a mind to pull Jim off Ed. Then Phin Bledsoe pushed through the ring, and he limped toward the fighters. Ed was blind now but still on his feet, still trying to reach Jim. Then Phin stepped between them and gently pushed Ed back. Ed was so far gone, he just caved in on himself as Phin faced Jim.

"Jim, in the name of the Lord, hold your anger."

JIM stared at Phin, frowning a little. He stepped back as though to get a better look. Phin wore a long black coat and a white shirt. He was thin and no match for Jim's fists. But he stood waiting, his eyes glowing in anger and accusation. Because of him, Jim had left Teco Springs and all of us waited to see what would happen. Jim passed the back of his hand across his mouth and I realized he was a little drunk.

"Phin Bledsoe," he said with a sneer, "the sky pilot!"

"A servant of the Lord, Jim, calling on you to mend your evil ways."

"Servant, hell! You always were a cheating, lying skunk and my bullet sent you crawling like a yellow belly to religion. No one fights a parson, so you're safe."

"That's a lie, Jim," Bledsoe said evenly and I heard an angry growl circle the crowd. "I was a sinner, true, and our fight gave me the inner light to see that I was doomed. But I didn't crawl, Jim. I didn't ask the protection of the pulpit. I'll fight you here and now if that is what you want. But you'll not lay hands on Ed Glaser again."

It was a direct challenge, thrown right in Jim's teeth. It was like a yearling tell-

ing an old bull what to do. Phin didn't bat an eye, but just stood there, eyes locked with Jim's. I could've heard a pin drop and Ed's gasping breath sounded like something ripping in the silence. At last Jim made a disgusted gesture.

"You played it smart, sky pilot. Your job protects you."

He turned on his heel and walked back up the steps and through the batwings. Phin wheeled and bent over Ed and soon there was a whole crowd around him. I didn't want to look at Ed and I didn't want to see Jim. I walked off down the street clean to the edge of town. I sat down on a hummock and tried to sort things out in my mind.

I'd built Jim up considerable over the years into something I could depend on—like the stars, or Paw, or the seasons. Ever since he had come back I'd been trying to hold onto that, fighting off the thoughts that'd come sneaking in.

Now, tonight, I had seen him drunk and deliberately torture a man. He'd insulted the minister, though him and Phin had never been friends. I remember his hard way of looking for trouble, the way he rode men down in his bearing and talk.

I felt miserable and I couldn't bring myself to decide right there and then. I walked back to the town. The crowd was gone from the saloon now and I went back into the General Store. Don Pentland was there and a bunch of men around him. They saw who I was and kept on talking.

"It was deliberate," one said. "Jim Corrigan kept roweling Ed, kept getting his mad up until Ed couldn't stand it no more."

"He had no call to talk to the parson that way," another put in. "Phin was a bad'n, I grant, years ago. But he's done a heap of good since he started preaching."

"Jim was feeling his whiskey," Don said and there was a little silence. "Him and me was the best of friends long past, and he done me a good turn lately. But that's over and done. He ain't the old Corrigan and I don't want no part of him."

"He needs a hoss-whipping bad!" another growled. "Lawman? Gun fighter? Give me a renegade any time!"

"Jim's gone home," Don said, "but I'm asking him to ride out in the morning after he's slept off his drunk." He turned.

I winced inside and Don saw me then. He came over. "Maybe you'd better stay with your folks, Cal. Ride over Monday morning."

When I got home, I found Sis had been crying, but that was over now. She was tight-lipped and didn't say much. Paw told me Ed had managed to get home sitting his saddle, but that was about all. He was in bed and would stay there for awhile. I just nodded and went to my old room. It was hours before I got to sleep.

Maybe Sis and me was both so miserable we needed one another's company. Anyhow the next morning me'n her saddled up and rode out from the ranch. We didn't say anything but we both knew what the other was thinking. We rode a wide circle and come back to the road just as Jim Corrigan come riding along.

HE SAW us and spurred his horse. There was no way we could avoid him. He had a bruise on his jaw and another on his cheek and his eyes were black, glittering slits. Sis straightened and spoke before Jim could get his mouth open.

"We're through, Jim. I helped doctor Ed. It was a useless and cruel thing—a hateful thing. I'll marry Ed Glaser if he asks me."

He looked surprised, then mad, and the bruises stood out like ugly blotches. Suddenly, he reached out and his arms pulled her to him. He kissed her, hard. She pushed away and her palm came across his face in a ringing slap that jarred him.

"I've been wrong about you all my life," she said in a low, level voice. "I wouldn't listen to Paw and I believed in you. Now I know what you're like, with no respect for man or woman. Don't ever come to the Diamond H again."

Sis had said, in a way, what I'd been thinking and wouldn't face for myself. But now I saw it was all true, and I rode between Sis and Jim.

"That goes double for me, Corrigan," I said. "Was a time I'd have rode anywhere with you, any time. I planned on having that ranch you used to talk about. But now I'd rather go in partners with—with—a skunk!"

He just stared at me, the mad draining out of him. I gave him a mean scowl, turned my horse and rode away, Sis beside me, heading back to the ranch. Jim just sat his horse, not moving for several minutes. We was some distance away when he called and spurred after us. I turned, cutting between him and Sis.

"Corrigan, if I was growed and had a gun—"

"You!" he said and he searched my face as though he was looking for something. Then he squared back his shoulders and talked to Sis. "Don Pentland needs a nurse and I come for you. He was bushwhacked last night—none of my doing."

"Don!" she jerked around.

"I think it was that Currycomb bunch," Jim said. "I called Miller's taw awhile back and they didn't dare strike in the open. They got Don as he rode in the yard last night. I was—drunk asleep."

"I'll ride over," Sis said hurriedly. "It's bad?"

"Bad enough. I patched him best I could this morning but I'm riding for a doctor. I'd feel better if you was with Don." He looked sharply at me. "Buck, do you reckon you could ride into town with me?"

It was the first time since he come back that Jim had used that name. It surprised me so that I nodded and had reined around before I caught myself. By then Sis was already racing away and Jim watched her go, a funny look on his face.

Then he caught himself and said, "We're wasting no time, Buck. Think you can keep up?"

"Sure!"

We never said another word clean into Teco Springs. Luckily, Jim found the doctor and sent him rattling toward the Double Bar O. Then Jim walked to the hardware store and bought a box of shells. He broke it open and loaded the loops in his belt, checked the action of his Colts and reloaded them. His jaw was set and hard, and the bruises on his face made him downright ugly.

We turned to leave and just then Phin Bledsoe come in the door. Jim stopped and so did Phin. Jim rubbed his hands along his trousers and acted like he wanted to say something, while Phin just stood there waiting and watching.

Then Jim moved around Phin without a word and walked out to the street. He swung into saddle and neck-reined his horse. We were clear of the town before Jim coughed, spat and the tight look left his face.

"Buck, what do you think of me?"

My jaw dropped and I didn't know how to answer him. He never once looked at me but kept his eyes on the road ahead. I scratched my head, started to answer, and then snapped my mouth shut.

"I mean it, Buck," he said. "I don't know why I come back to Teco Springs—the whole place is changed."

"No, it ain't, Jim. It's you. I reckon after last night there ain't a person that wouldn't be glad to see you ride on to Arizona—and stay there."

"And you, Buck? Pearl, too?"

"I don't like you no more. Sis cried when you left home five years gone, but she'll be glad to see you go this time."

JIM didn't say anything and I couldn't without I talked meaner'n a feller should to a man—specially a gun fighter like Jim. But I begun to have hopes that maybe Jim could see what he was doing, how he had changed. Just about that time we come in sight of the ranch and Jim spoke real low, like he was mad.

"I got one job to do and then I'm shaking the dust of Teco Springs for good. It's no place for a man like me."

"Jim," I said, "you ain't augering with no one but yourself. Do your job and git. Leave us alone. Maybe we're sticks-in-the-mud and sort of look to one another. But we don't go hunting for fights deliberate just to show how good we are with our fists or guns. We don't cut a man up just to see him bleed if we get in a fight we can't avoid."

"Go on," he said tightly.

"Well—we don't hold a grudge against Phin Bledsoe when he's changed his ways and is doing good. Jim, he come right up and apologized to me for the mean things he used to do to us kids. He did it to Bo Sawyer, too, and Stinky Butz. We like Phin now."

We rode through the gate and Jim's face was black with anger, but he wasn't saying nothing. I followed him in the house. The doctor was already with Don and the crew

was waiting out on the porch to find out how he was. Sis sat in the living room and looked away when Jim come in. A minute later the doctor came out.

"He'll make it, but he'll be in bed for some time. Broken shoulder bone and loss of blood, nothing vital struck. I'll be out tomorrow."

Jim walked to the bedroom and I stopped at the door. Don's eyes were closed and his face looked almost paper white. He opened them as Jim came to the bed.

"I'm getting Ray Miller, Don." Jim said. Don searched his face and then weakly shook his head.

"I want just one favor from you, Jim," he said slowly. "Git out and don't come back!"

"You, too, Don?" Jim asked.

"I come home to tell you to leave, Jim," Don said and I could barely hear him. "You've turned into something bad, no more'n a legal, gunhung renegade. You lost all that was good about you. I'd rather face Miller myself and be killed than have a—killing snake like you go as my friend. Get out, Jim."

Jim Corrigan turned on his heel. He looked like a horse had kicked him in the middle of the stomach. He never even saw me and he acted like he was a little drunk. He groped for the knob on the front door, found it, and jerked it open.

Suddenly I knew I couldn't let him just wander off alone like that. Sure, he wasn't no good any more, but maybe for the sake of the old Jim Corrigan I could sort of make things a little easier.

By the time I stepped out on the porch, Jim had already swung in the saddle.

Chapter V

REJUVENATION IN RED HELL

HE DIDN'T head for town, but turned sharp left and set the spurs deep. I knew where he was going then and it scared me. Maybe Jim Corrigan was one helluva gun slammer but there was just too many men at the Currycomb for him to face down. I yelled at him but he didn't hear me. I raced for my horse, not knowing exactly what to do except stop Jim somehow.

He had a long lead and he was going fast as though he'd have to hurry to catch Miller and the Currycomb before they disappeared somewhere. I rolled spurs time and again, the first time I'd ever done it mean, and my horse moved like it had a bur under its tail.

But I couldn't catch up with Jim. I kept yelling at him until my throat was hoarse, but he didn't once look back and he kept getting further and further away from me. Finally I lost sight of him and I knew there was no chance of heading him off along the road.

So I cut off the trail and started straight as a line for the Currycomb ranch. There were some low hills the road circled and if I could cut through them, I might stop Jim just before he reached the spread itself. I used spurs and hat, and my poor horse gave everything he had. We raced through the narrow and low canyons and finally broke free on the other side.

Over to my right and ahead stood the low Currycomb ranch buildings, the road winding to the east, sometimes hiding itself behind clumps of bushes and cottonwoods. My heart sank when I saw the empty trail, for Jim would have been this far by now. I knew he hadn't turned back.

I should've given up right then, but I didn't. Somehow I didn't think about that tough Currycomb crew except that they could shoot Jim down and I had to stop it. I didn't once figure that I could be shot, too. Golly, I wasn't brave by any sight, just so tied up with one idea my brain didn't have room for another. I raced toward the road, gained it and then went toward the Currycomb.

I wasn't far from the big sprawling ranch house and then I saw the black horse standing droop-headed by the gate. Jim's horse! Then I saw Jim himself, starting to walk slow and steady toward the ranch house. Ray Miller and his four hired hands stood on the verandah, spread out some, watching Jim like a bunch of cougars eyeing a dogie.

"Jim!" I shouted. "Jim! Come back!"

I swept through the gate. Jim's stride broke and I saw him throw a quick, surprised glance over his shoulder. I reckon that's all Ray and his bunch wanted.

Before I knew it, seemed like the whole world exploded into gun flame and

powdersmoke. I saw Jim go into a crouch and his hands dropped down to his guns. I saw dust kicking up all around him, his hat sail off.

I sawed back on the reins but my horse was scared by the guns and had the bit in his teeth. He streaked right toward the house and I couldn't do nothing but hang on. My eyes felt as big as dollars and popping from the sockets. I saw everything clear and sharp-edged, like it was all very slow and deliberate. It wasn't, of course.

I was right in the powdersmoke and I could see the porch rail black and sharp. I saw little orange tongues spitting and I heard something hit my horse like a rock thrown in a mudhole. His front legs dropped out from under him. I don't remember kicking free of the stirrups, but next I knew I sailed over his head and the ground was racing up at me. I threw up my arm to protect my face and then I hit.

Pink and red light exploded all around me. Then there wasn't nothing—not even me. The next I knew, I looked straight up into the sky and there wasn't any shooting any more. I heard a funny burbling sound somewhere and I didn't like it. The light hurt my eyes and I realized I lay all sprawled out on the ground, and someone was hitting the back of my head with a hammer.

I ROLLED over and sat up. I sure wished I hadn't for it felt like my head was ripped apart. That passed and I looked around. Ray Miller lay on the porch, one arm hanging limp over the side. I stared at him and my stomach slowly turned over. He was the first dead man I ever seen. I saw my second and third a minute later, one sprawled in front of the door, the other on the porch.

The fourth man breathed funny and he laid out in the yard. I was sick then and it was several minutes before I could look around for Jim.

First I saw my horse, dead, and beyond him stood Jim. For a scared minute I thought he was gone, too, and then I saw he breathed and tried to grin at me, though he kept biting his lip.

"I thought for awhile they got you, Buck. You hit?"

I pulled myself up, swayed a minute. Nothing was wrong with me but a busted head when I hit the ground. I walked over to Jim and I saw his chest was bloody and I got scared again. He pulled himself up on one elbow and gasped for breath.

"I'll make it, Buck. I'll make it. What's left of Currycomb went a-helling out of the yard, and he won't be back."

"One man's still breathing."

"We'll cart him to the springs. He'll tell what Miller planned about getting Don and me. Damned if he nearly didn't, at that!"

"What'll I do, Jim?" I asked, sort of helpless. Jim didn't answer for a minute.

"Why shucks, Buck. See if you can stop this damned bleeding of mine. Go find the Currycomb buckboard and hitch it up. After I'm patched, help me climb up in it and we'll drive to the Double Bar O."

That's what I done. When I pulled Jim's shirt open, that bullet hole looked awfully close to dead center, and I guess I got white. Jim didn't say nothing, just shook his head like he was telling me not to be worried about it.

After I'd stopped the bleeding with a clumsy bandage I made from my shirt tail, Jim had me look at the wounded Currycomb hand. He had a busted shoulder, had lost a lot of blood and was more scared than hurt. I bandaged him up, Jim telling me what to do, and I had to fight some again to keep my stomach in place.

But it was done finally, and I hurried to the barn and hitched up the buckboard. The Currycomb renegade only had one hand to work with and he was too shaky to be much help. But somehow I managed to get Jim in the wagon. His face was paper white and he breathed shallow like he didn't have enough strength to move his lungs. I noticed a pink stain at the corner of his lips and I wiped it away.

"He ain't got much rope left," the renegade said. I turned around, mad clean through.

"You don't know Jim Corrigan! He's taken bullets before, plenty of 'em! He'll be living when you're in Boothill."

I hopped up on the seat and picked up the reins. I wanted to hurry but I was afraid maybe the jolting would hurt Jim worse. So I pressed my lips tight and let them horses just amble along the road.

(Continued on page 128)

DEAD MEN DIE SLOW!

By DAN KIRBY

JOE LASSITER eased his weight in the saddle and watched the cattle coming up from their morning water at the springs. He was a lean, hollow-flanked man, burned dark by the blistering sun. His eyes left the cattle and drifted across the gray-brown range, parched and withering from the ninety day drought. He squared his shoulders and wiped sweaty palms against his faded, tight-legged Levis. He took a limp sack of Durham from his vest and twisted a smoke.

"At least we still got water," he said, and shot a look at the rider beside him.

His companion, a woman dressed in a man's range garb, nodded and her eyes turned from the cattle to look at Joe.

She said, "It isn't water that'll hurt us, Joe. It's the coming winter. There's no hay to put up and we got no money

The gunman's draw was smooth, faster than Joe's eyes could follow. . . .

The secret that dying Joe Lassiter carried with him up that silent, sinister street was both ironic and deadly: A man with nothing left to lose—not even his life—is the hardest man in the world to kill!

to buy it. You can't feed through a winter without money. If the drought don't get you one way it gets you another, Joe."

Joe nodded. He'd been thinking those things himself but had hated to voice them to his wife. Janice had been through a lot out here since Joe had started his own brand. Her face carried the same tight, worried look that lined Joe's own. She didn't smile much anymore. Joe pinched out his cigarette and slipped the stub in the Durham sack.

He said, "I been thinkin' I'd go in and see Max Harvell. A thousand dollars would see us through the winter, Janice. That isn't much money to a banker. Come spring the market will be up again."

The woman shook her head. "Harvell's a business man, Joe. He has more money in these cattle now than he can get out of them with beef like it is." There was a weariness in her voice, a despondency that he'd never heard before. It gave him a queer, shaky feeling to hear her talk like that. It was as though his own faith depended on hers and would crumble with it.

THEY'D been out here three years now. The first two had gone by quickly and life had been as easy as life could be on a shoestring ranch. They had figured on building a real house this year and moving out of the half-frame, half-sod shanty. They'd figured on paying off the bank, too. Now they were going to borrow again, or go out of business.

That was the way ranching went. You stayed in the saddle all day, you pulled up larkspur and snake weed, fought off rustlers and slow-elking nesters, strung drift fences and finally got together a couple hundred head of fair cow critters. Then the weather wiped you out.

A dust devil whirled up over a rise and whizzed by them, scattering dead grass and showering them with gritty sand. A coughing seized Joe, choking him, doubling him over the saddle. He couldn't seem to shake that cold. Funny a man would have a cold in dry, hundred degree weather. He straightened up, wheezing, and loosened the neckerchief around his throat.

Janice looked at him worriedly, her brown eyes somber with concern. She said, "That cough shouldn't hang on like that Joe. You need to go to bed."

He shook his head. "It can't hurt nothin' to go see Harvell, Janice. I kind of think he'll listen to me." He tried to keep the hope from fading out of his voice.

"No," Janice said. "No, it can't hurt anything, Joe. Go on if you want, and stop by and see Doctor Richards while you're in town. He seemed kind of worried about you when he was out here last week."

Joe nodded. "I'll see him." He settled back in the saddle and kneed the roan mare. He hated to leave the herd on Janice. It was hard work, even for two riders, to get the herd away from the water out to where there was still grass enough to keep them from starving. But he had to have that loan.

"Joe!" Janice's voice was sharp, calling after him. He reined in, waiting for her. She drew up close and reached over to lift the sixgun from his waist band.

"Leave the gun here, Joe," she said. "You know how it was when we were in town last Saturday. Whitey Tyree is there."

Joe Lassiter's mouth thinned into a tight slash and his eyes hardened. He said stiffly, "I ain't lookin' for trouble with Whitey, Janice. I got more important things to worry about."

Janice looked at him quietly but there was a tension in her, a tension and wall-like reserve that once broken would unloose a flood of grief and emotion.

She wants to cry, Joe thought morosely. She's fought herself out here at the ranch and now Whitey has to come along to make it worse. I'm all she's got, me and the ranch here, and she stands to lose both.

Janice said, "It doesn't matter whether you want trouble with Whitey Tyree, Joe. He wants it with you. It was your testimony that sent him to Huntsville for killing Sam Mason. How he got off with five years, I don't know. But he did and he's back, Joe, and if you wear a gun he'll find a way to make you draw on him. He'll kill you, Joe."

He watched her lift the .44 from his waistband and slip it in her saddle-bag. He said with a casualness he did not feel,

"Whitey's had one taste of prison, Janice. He'll think awhile before he shoots another man." But he knew it wasn't so.

WHITEY Tyree was a killer. The gunman had tried to taunt him into a fight last Saturday, but he'd ignored the man because Janice had been along. Queer, he thought now, that he'd forgotten all about Whitey since last Saturday. Yet it wasn't so queer either, when you figured he had been working fifteen hours a day to keep his cattle moving from grass to water. And there was the cough and choking spells that hung on him like a plague. He had plenty to worry about besides Whitey Tyree.

Janice smiled briefly and it warmed him, giving him an assurance that he could not give himself. She said, "I think you're right, Joe, but watch him."

He left her then and headed for the trail that led to Blanco. Another spasm of coughing seized him, leaving him weak and gasping for breath. A cold, chilling fear, born of suspicion and uncertainty seized him, but he fought it back.

He'd see Doc Richards the first thing. He hadn't paid the old doctor for the last visit, but Doc Richards was a cow country man. He knew how it was with shoestring ranchers when the country dried up, and he'd take another notch up in his own belt and sweat out the dry spell with the cattlemen.

Blanco lay squat and gray under the noon sun, its stores and buildings of granite block and weathered wood shimmering in the heat waves. He dismounted in the town square and tied the roan mare to the hitch rail by the stone trough.

He rolled a smoke and lighted it, his eyes moving up the street to stop uncertainly on the Cattleman's Bank. He'd have to go in that bank and see Max Harvell, and when he walked out, he'd either be over the hump or stone broke. He'd know inside of an hour or two. Thinking about it put butterflies in his stomach and left him cold and shaky. He sighted Doc Richards' office and moved toward it.

He nodded to Bill McGraw and Jed Baxter, a couple of other shoestring men who were sweating out the drought. Their faces were lined, making them old beyond their years. He wondered if they'd come in to see the banker, too. Maybe they'd already seen Harvell and been turned down. A panicky feeling gripped him, urging him to run toward the bank.

He stopped and wiped his palms on his thighs, telling himself that he had to take it slow. He had to be confident and sure of himself when he talked to Harvell. The banker always said he bet his money on the man instead of the collateral. A man that showed he was unsure of himself couldn't expect others to back him.

A man moved down the walk toward him, a tall, gaunt man with two guns thonged low on his thighs. He moved with a kind of slouching yet graceful stride, his hands moving slightly in rhythm with his steps, finger tips brushing the black bone handles of the .45's. The man stopped in front of Joe, his face stiff and expressionless, his eyes flat and dull gray like the granite stone that housed the bank. He said quietly, "Howdy, Joe."

Joe nodded warily, muscles tensed. "Howdy, Whitey."

The tall man drew the makings and rolled a smoke, easily, sure of himself. Why not, Joe thought bitterly. He's got the fastest gun and he can shoot and run. He don't give a damn if the law's after him. There's nobody depending on him, nothing to hold him here. What's he got to lose?

Whitey Tyree grinned crookedly. "Your wife ain't along today, Joe. That's nice. I hate to shoot a man in front of his wife. It gives me the creeps, hearin' them squall."

Joe edged away, taking some of the gaunt man's chill with him. He said huskily, "I got no quarrel with you, Whitey. I ain't packin' a gun."

The gunman laughed dryly. "Hell, Lassiter, you think that'll stop me? I spent five years in Huntsville. Remember? I'm back now, and it's yore turn to go to hell—for keeps." He laughed again, a brittle, wracking sound, and moved on down the boardwalk like he'd just passed the time of day with an old friend. Joe stared after him, wondering what it was that drove a man like Tyree on to new killings.

Ego, probably, he reckoned, for they were a breed of men that killed not only

for profit and vengeance but simply to prove they could kill. They were misfits —shadowy men who clung to the fringe of civilization but could neither understand it nor compete inside its boundaries. And since they could not, they killed the men who stood up to them.

JOE shrugged and moved toward Doc Richards' office. Doc Richards was at his desk when Joe walked in. He looked up, a big fleshy man with a broad, humorous mouth and a head completely bald except for the gray fringe that half circled it. The doctor nodded, shoved back a stack of books and prescriptions and motioned Joe to a seat.

Joe said uneasily, "Janice said I ought to drop by to see you, Doc. It's that cough. It ain't gettin' no better and my wind ain't what it ought to be. I got to whip myself in shape for the winter, Doc. It's gonna be rough."

Doc Richards peered at him through thick-lensed glasses. He picked up a stethoscope and unbuttoned Joe's shirt. He moved the stethoscope around on Joe's chest, listening as he breathed. He said, "That was Whitey Tyree you was talking to across the street just now, wasn't it, Joe?"

Joe nodded. "Yeah, same old Whitey, Doc. Lookin' for trouble, but he won't get it from me. I got nothin' to gain and everything to lose crossin' guns with Tyree. I got the ranch and Janice to look after."

Doc shrugged. "Whitey's a bad hombre, Joe. You can't put him off forever. It's either fight or run. Like you said, you got the ranch and Janice to look after. You can't run." He moved the stethoscope to Joe's back, moving it around, tapping and listening.

Joe said anxiously, "I got to see Harvell today. I need another thousand to winter on. There ain't no hay to cut on my spread. It's been a hard summer, Doc. It's been tough on Janice."

Doc Richards said testily, "You get them cows and Janice off yore mind, Joe. Tyree is your most trouble right now."

Joe grinned crookedly. "I got two hundred cows that will be starvin' come the first snow. I got a woman that's worked herself near to death to keep things from falling apart, and I got a sick spell I can't shake. Doc, I got no time to worry about Tyree."

Doc Richards straightened up. He moved slowly to the swivel chair and sat down heavily. He said quietly, "It looks bad for you, Joe. You haven't got much longer the way things are lookin' now. But you never can tell. I knew a gunslinging gent once up at Tombstone, name of Doc Holliday. Holliday was a washed up dentist with a bad case of tuberculosis. They said he didn't have six months to live and he wanted to die, but—"

Joe stood up, a kind of numb, unreal feeling flooding over him. He said, "So that's it, Doc. My lungs." A wry grin twisted his lips. "Me and Job must be brothers." He walked out, conscious that the doctor was staring after him.

He needed to get drunk but couldn't. Now, worse than ever, they'd need that loan. If Harvell came through with the money, Janice could pull through the winter even if he didn't. She'd still have the ranch. He pulled his hat down a little harder on his head, wiped his palms on his Levis and headed for the bank.

Max Harvell was a small, wiry man with a firm, out-thrust jaw that gave him the appearance of a belligerent banty rooster. He was talking to the teller when Joe walked in. He said, "I been expectin' you, Joe." He led the way to a small, private room off from the lobby.

JOE followed him, feeling a little scared, a little sheepish as he always did when he had to borrow money. It was even worse this time, for he didn't have any collateral to put up. He just needed the money.

Harvell looked at him steadily. He said, "Took you a long time to come in, Joe. The others already hit me up. How much you need?"

Joe squirmed in the chair, crossing his legs, building a smoke from the limp sack of Durham. "A thousand would see us through, Mr. Harvell. We can sell off twenty-thirty head of the lightest ones. That'll cut down the feed a little and give us extra cash if the winter drags out. I figure a thousand will do it."

The banker rubbed his jaw and stared out the window. "I saw Tyree hanging

around the town, Joe. You seen him?"

Joe nodded. "Yeah, I run into him a couple times." He studied the tip of his cigarette, squinting against the smoke that spiraled toward his eyes.

Harvell nodded, turning his eyes from the window to Joe. He asked quietly, "What kind of collateral you figure to put up, Joe? I've got those cattle of yours covered for all they're worth on the market."

Joe felt his stomach knot up. He pinched out the cigarette. "I got nothin' to put up, Mr. Harvell, but the way I figure it, you got nothin' to lose. I put the money in feed and the feed goes to the cattle. It'll up their weight. The extra pounds will cover the thousand come spring, even without a rise in the market.

"I—we sure need the money, Mr. Harvell. If we sell off all the old stuff to pay you next fall, the calf crop will keep us in business and if the market comes up we'll make a little profit. If we sell now—" A coughing seized him and he doubled over the chair, straining for breath.

The banker shook his head. "The way things stack up, it's a poor risk, Joe. I have to protect the depositors. I'd like to do—"

Joe stood up, a bitterness stamped deep on his dark face. He said hollowly, "That's all right, Mr. Harvell. I don't want no favors. It has to be a business deal." He stalked out of the bank, feeling suddenly empty and burned out inside.

Doc Richards was standing outside. He said, "Joe, if there's anything I can do let me know."

Joe nodded and walked on. He'd have to sell the cattle now before winter set in. That would go hard with Janice. It wasn't right that all their work and planning should be ruined like this. He'd have to get him a job for the winter with one of the big outfits. Janice would be by herself out at the ranch. It would be lonely out there with the northers howling down, no stock on the place, and Joe holed up at some line camp. Suppose he got down sick?

Whitey Tyree moved out of the Red Cow saloon, walking toward him, swaying a little from too many drinks. He was ugly, mean-eyed as he drew up to Joe. "You ain't got that gun yet, saddle bum? Still yellow, eh?" He laughed coarsely. "I hear you and yore old lady are starvin' out on that two-bit spread. A bullet's faster, amigo."

A cold, killing anger seeped into Joe, steadying him, clearing his mind like a splash of cold water. The ranch was gone now. No use thinking about it any longer. He was on the rocks himself, according to the doc. There was Janice, of course. He still had her, but for how long? Come winter he might be on his back, a drag on her. Something else to worry her and keep the smile off her lips. She'd do better without him.

He said, "You might just be right, Whitey. I ain't left town yet, have I?" There was a bleakness in his voice that made the gunman blink, and wiped the leer from his twisted lips. Joe brushed Tyree and headed for the stage station down the street.

HE bought a one-way ticket to Austin, Texas and when he paid for it he had ninety-seven dollars left. That and a little change. That wouldn't take a woman far out on her own, but his brother Bob was down in Austin. Bob would see that Janice had a place to stay, find work for her, maybe.

He headed over to Doc Richards office and walked inside. He handed the ticket to the doctor. "Doc," he said, quietly, "there is something you can do for me if I ain't able to do it myself. I got a ticket here for Janice. She's going to spend the winter with my brother and his wife at Austin. See that she gets it, Doc."

Doc Richards reached for the ticket slowly. "What're you up to, Joe?"

Joe took a deep breath, let it out slow. "I want to borrow your gun, Doc. I left mine at the ranch."

He moved up the street slowly, eyes probing into the shadows of buildings, into the saloon, watching for Tyree. There were those in town who probably thought he was afraid of Whitey, who were telling it around that he was dodging the gunman. They couldn't understand that when a man had a ranch and a wife to look out for he couldn't take chances on being killed. It never occurred to them that a man would be a damn fool to let

himself get talked into something he couldn't possibly win.

Well, he'd lost everything now. There was nothing more to lose.

Tyree was standing in the doorway of the blacksmith shop. He saw Joe and moved forward slowly, hands brushing his gun butts. He said loudly, "Hell I didn't think you had the guts, Lassiter." There was a kind of rough respect in the gunman's voice.

Joe kept coming, his eyes glued to the gunman's hands. He wasn't thinking about the cows now, nor about Janice. He'd done what he could for them—that's all any man could say. He wasn't worrying about how fast Tyree was, or how it would feel when a bullet smashed into him. When a man has nothing to lose he doesn't give a damn.

He said quietly, "Whenever you get ready, Whitey."

The gunman's draw was smooth, faster than Joe's eyes could follow. His own hand had closed around the .45 in his waistband, was drawing it out when Tyree fired.

GUN thunder rose to a wild, ear-splitting roar. Something slapped into Joe's shoulder, burning like a hot iron, knocking him flat on his back. He rolled over, his mind blurred with pain. It seemed to him now that he was just watching the fight. He never knew when he squeezed off the shot that brought Tyree down. One minute the guns had been blasting and now they were silent.

The gunman lay crumpled in the dust, blood stain spreading over his shirt and trickling down the corner of his mouth. Joe looked at him and felt sick, nauseated with the pain and heat and smell of gunsmoke. It had taken hardly a minute.

The crowd was spilling into the street now. They formed a ring around Joe and the dead gunman, pushing closer, talking in excited, strident tones. Doc Richards elbowed his way through and knelt beside Joe. He didn't say anything. He ripped the pants leg open and poured alcohol over the torn flesh. Joe bit his lip. The doctor ripped open the shirt and swabbed the hole in his shoulder. He put on clean bandages and said, matter of factly, "You got off easy, Joe. Clean wounds, both of 'em."

Max Harvell, the banker, edged through the crowd. He grinned at Joe and winked knowingly, "I figured you knew what I meant when I said you were a poor risk, Joe. I couldn't hand you over a thousand dollars knowing Whitey might cut you down any day. Stop by the bank before you get out of town."

Joe's head was whirling dizzily. "You hear what he said, Doc? Stop by the bank, he said. I reckon I'll get that thousand. He don't know about my lungs, Doc. I'm still a poor risk and I reckon I ought to tell him."

The doctor grunted. "There ain't nothing wrong with your lungs, Joe. I was talking about the same thing Harvell was when I said you didn't have long to live. You took it wrong and I let it lay. Whitey would have gunned you down sure, the way it was going. You was so busy thinking about Janice and that ranch, you couldn't see what was shaping up, Joe.

"When Whitey forced your hand you'd be thinking about what would happen to Janice and those cows, instead of concentrating on killing Whitey. You'd have been worried and tight inside, Joe, because you had so much to lose. Doc Holliday said once that a man that didn't give a damn about living was the hardest kind of man to kill. I figured Holliday knew what he was talking about."

Joe blinked uncertainly. "That cough I got, Doc. What about—?"

Doc Richards grinned. "A touch of asthma, Joe. The dry spell has kicked up lots of dust. You'll be okay when it rains a little."

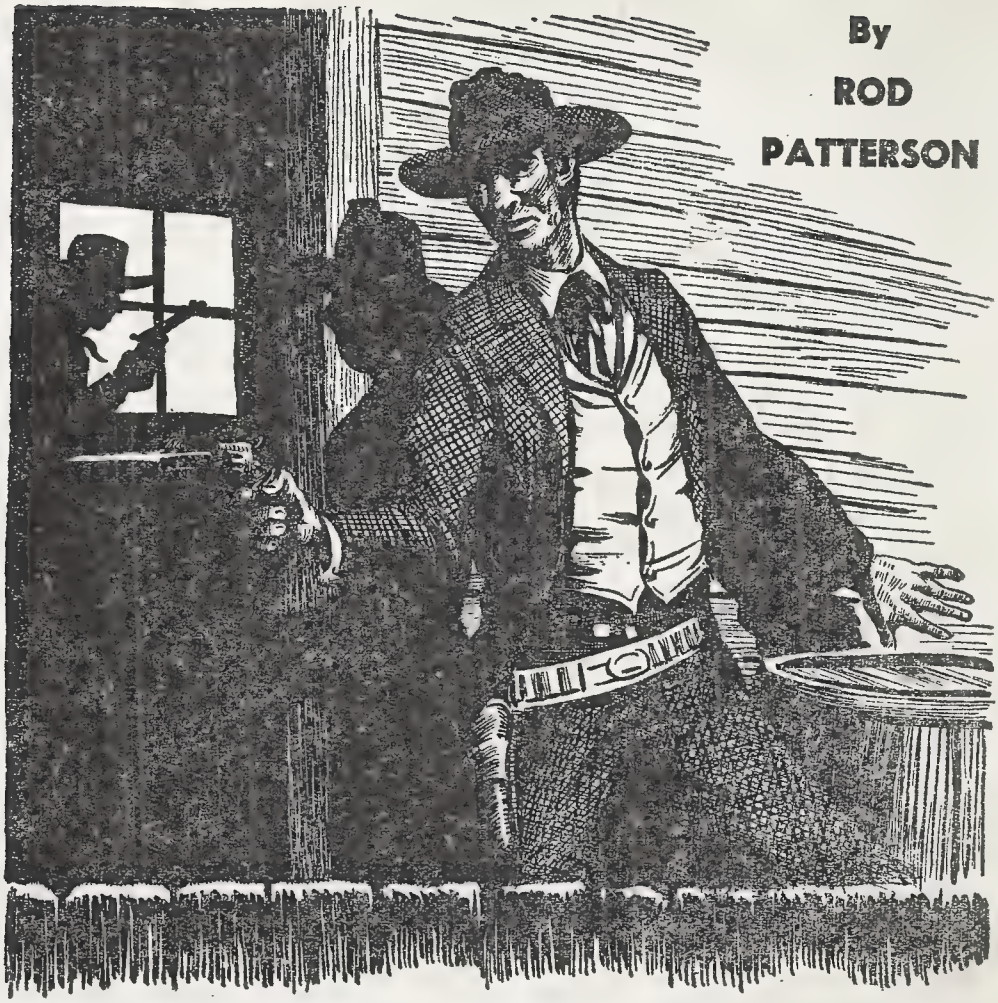
Joe stood up. His face didn't look so old and weathered now. He felt pretty good. Come spring the beef market would rise and he and Janice would build that house. He could see her smiling now as they went over the plans.

He said, "Doc, that ticket to Austin. Tear it up and if yuh ever tell Janice about it I'll use your own gun on you." He was grinning.

Doc Richards fished out the ticket. "I'll turn it in for cash," he said. "It'll just about pay for them bandages I put on you." He grinned back.

Too long the gun-bossed cowtown of Mission Wells had starved for the breath of freedom. And now came tough, hell-for-leather Jim Fortune, to wake that town with a reveille of lead, and feed it a dinner of barbecued gunmen—provided the reckless, high-riding chef didn't get himself served up on the way as breakfast for a crew of cold-eyed trail-buzzards!

SHOOT-OUT AT



By
ROD
PATTERSON

The slug spat out at him from around the door.

A Smashing Empire-Builder Novelette

Chapter I

MISSION WELLS AIN'T BIG ENOUGH

JIM FORTUNE left his horse ranch down under the San Lomas bench that Saturday, covering the twenty miles to Mission Wells by dusk. He found the town already crowded with ranchmen, cowhands, homesteaders. Saddle ponies and ranch wagons filled every available space along the tie rails, and Jim stabled at the O.K. Corral, strolling on with the throng through the lights and shadows under the wooden-awninged arcades.

His first stop was at Sinful Sam Gallup's Saloon. He came in through the

MISSION WELLS

swing doors, glanced casually over the crowd assembled and put his belly against the bar, calling for whiskey.

The proprietor served him, a plump man attired in the neat style of his trade. "We figgered," he blandy announced, "it was about time for you to set your wolf loose. The boys been askin' for you, Jim."

"Been four months," Jim said affably, a glint of pleasure in his gray eyes. His skin had that deep red burn some men get from working in strong sunlight and steady wind. "Got to fightin' with myself. No fun in that. Anybody in town I can pick on?"

The saloonman looked uneasy as he poured Jim's second drink and declined the pay for it. "Doane Jackman's back," he said in a lowered, confidential tone, casting a sideways look at the crowd along the bar. "Was in here a couple hours ago. I hear he's gonna be my competitor. Talk is he's buyin' the Red Diamond Dance Hall up the street."

Jim's expression turned suddenly obscure. There was a slight tightening of the muscles around his eyes and mouth. "I thought," he commented with heavy irony, "his business was buyin' horses. Now he's goin' to deal in sin—with a sign on it?"

Sam leaned a bit closer over his bar. His troubled look was unconcealed. "Jim, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but Edith Wilder came in on the noon train. She looks like a million dollars in the poke."

Jim's eyes hardened. He said, softly enough to sound dangerous, "Why tell me?"

SAM spread his pink hands and shrugged, withdrawing behind his bland expression and then wiping the wet bar carefully. "Doane's been with her all afternoon," he said. "Just thought you'd orter know it 'fore somebody else with a long nose—"

"Never mind." Jim pulled around and went slowly back through the swing doors. He put his wide shoulders against the saloon's adobe wall, making up a smoke, his muscles apparently idle, his manner absorbed. But his gaze keened the street and its slowly drifting crowd, and his eyes were veiled and quiet and cold.

Usually at the start of this semi-annual weekend in town, he would be feeling pretty good, with very few regrets and no real sorrow to drown, with only one disturbing memory which he kept to himself. That memory concerned Edith Wilder and what he and she had once meant to each other, and it concerned Doane Jackman who was the only man in the world he had ever hated enough to kill.

And now, just as he had been all set to look up his friends in town for a poker game and the comradeship he had missed after a season of hard work at his ranch, the girl's name had cropped up on the tongue of a saloonman along with the name of Jackman, the man who had been at the bottom of all the trouble.

Standing slackly against the saloon's shadowed wall, he allowed his thoughts to gather and harry him once more. He remembered the anger and pride in Edith's voice when she had told him she would never come back to San Lomas, that she was leaving the country forever. That was five years ago.

It was not that he blamed her for feeling as she had: Lafe, her brother, had been caught and convicted of horse stealing. He had tried to argue her into staying at the Wilder ranch, next to his in the hills, had futilely pleaded that no one ever found peace of mind by running away.

He knew now what it must have cost her pride when she had asked him to take her away. It wasn't that he didn't love her, but he had his spread and horse herd, and he didn't want to sell it just then.

Doane Jackman, a commission man for a syndicate of stock buyers in Texas, had been involved in the whole mixed-up affair. With his headquarters in Mission Wells, he had been operating in the region several months before he had seen Edith Wilder. Following that first meeting in town he had driven twice a week to the Wilder ranch and once or twice had remained over night.

All this Jim had regarded with nothing more than mild annoyance. Long before his mind reacted to danger, his instinct warned him. And so, unconsciously, he had begun to find excuses for spending time with Edith and Lafe—the latter a big-boned fellow, sullen at times but for the most part good-natured.

Jim had been at the ranch the night Jackman had driven out in his two-bronc buckboard to bring Edith to the Stockmen's dance. Jim had voiced his disapproval of Jackman. A fistfight had followed and Jackman had been soundly whipped. But physical victory brought to Jim the full impact of the girl's anger and resentment.

She and he had quarreled thereafter at every meeting. Meanwhile Doane Jackman continued with his courtship. And then the scandal had broken. Lafe was arrested for horse stealing and jailed at the Wells. His trial and conviction followed swiftly. Later, Jim had learned that Doane Jackman had furnished the money for Lafe's lawyer, and had even tried to bribe two jurors.

But Lafe went to the state penitentiary for five years, maintaining silence to the last, steadfastly refusing to incriminate the buyer of a hundred pure-bred Morgan colts he had stolen from stud ranches on the nearby ranges.

Within a week after the trial, Edith had closed her house and had been taken to the Wells by Doane Jackman. One day she had been seen in town, the next she had boarded an eastbound train. Jackman disappeared the same day.

AND NOW they were both back. Jim knew he ought to ignore the past, knew he ought to get his horse at the livery corral and head for home. But something held him here in town. It was that old mood, unconsciously acknowledged, that had led him into trouble before. Once again instinct had taken over, and gradually, as he watched the drift of the crowds along the darkened walks under the arcades, a new thought took possession of his mind.

Five years ago the news that Edith and Jackman had been away together would have blown the lid off his temper, would have hurt him like the cut of a jag-toothed saw. But now the news that Editih was in town stirred him in a different way. It was like discovering that the thing you had always taken for granted had suddenly been endowed with fresh and exciting possibilities.

Automatically he left the saloon's shadowed wall and walked with the crowd, moving slowly but with a stubborn determination. There was a feeling inside him that was new—a wildness he knew he could not control. Suddenly he knew he was going to take Edith Wilder back to her home on the bench. He didn't know how—or why—but he knew that what had been between them once was not finished.

The lights from shops and saloons fell on the sidewalks, and men and women moving in front of those lights threw long streaky shadows into the street and on the saddle ponies and rigs standing along the rails.

He had almost reached the corner of Sage Street when he saw Edith in the crowd ahead. He could have picked her out of any mob by the way she walked—head up, shoulders back, long legs swinging. She was dressed in town clothes, a dark suit and white shoes, the skirt whipping tightly about her trim calves.

He caught up with her at the end of three long strides. He said, "Edith!"

She whipped around, startled—but when she saw who it was, her face brightened, and her hand lifted impetuously as though she meant to go into his arms. Then she let her hand fall to her side, and gravity returned to her hazel eyes. She was a pretty woman—prettier than when he had seen her last. Only he didn't like the makeup that reddened her mouth and made dark shadows beneath her eyes.

"Why, Jim," she said, her voice almost inaudible in the rumble of the crowd and the traffic of riders and wagons in the street. He felt anger give way to anxiety. He studied her with a steady, probing glance that made her look away briefly before she could meet his eyes again. "How've you been, Jim?"

He said, roughly, "Looks like you'd struck it rich. How'd you get along back East?"

"I've been in Santa Fé," she told him, coolness suddenly in her gaze and in her voice. "Just got in this afternoon."

"So I heard," he said in the same tone. He had his black hat in his hand and now he put it on, adding, "Can we go somewhere and talk?"

"No, Jim," she answered, shaking her dark head, her smile gone now. "There's nothing to talk about. I came back to work in the Wells and—"

"Where?" he demanded bluntly.

She shook her head again. "Please, Jim, don't tell anyone I'm back. And don't follow me. I'm on my own."

"Have you heard from Lafe?"

She regarded him a long time, and then said, her voice brittle with bitterness, "I hope I never do. I hate him and never want to see him again!"

Jim's eyes turned hard. "Maybe he wouldn't've got in that trouble if it hadn't been for wantin' things better on your account."

"Don't give me that!" There was an insolence in the tilt of her chin. "Doane Jackman tried to help him, long before he started stealing—"

"Doane Jackman!" Jim cut in with so harsh a vehemence that people passing turned to stare at him. "The devil owns him!"

Her mouth curled with scorn. "After all," she breathed, "I couldn't expect *you* to believe that!"

The stares of passing men and women began to rankle him. "What can you do in this town?"

"I already have a job."

"Doin' what?"

She looked at him, her eyes defiant. "Forget it. It's work. It's a living."

He shook his head, a dogged set to his jaw. "I'll hire a rig and drive you home. You can't stay in town—alone."

"I'm not alone," she told him, her words a challenge. Then she added, "There are plenty of people I know."

"Then you won't go home?"

Her smile came back but she shook her head decisively. "I've nothing to go home to. Jim, just forget you ever knew me. And please don't bother me again. Goodbye." She started to pass him.

FOR AN instant he blocked her way, muscles knotting along his jaw, then he pulled aside and turned to watch her swing off into the crowd. He stood motionless, like a rock in a stream with the current boiling around it, a tall, wedge-shouldered man in a dark suit, the trousers tucked into the tops of spurred boots, the bulge of a gun belt under the buttoned coat, and the shine of old leather and an ivory-handled Colt barely visible.

He kept thinking about her as he remembered their last meeting on the bench five years before, the girl who worked horses like a skilled horse hand, casually expert when breaking a colt to saddle, firm and unafraid with an outlaw bronc; a girl who had been a part of the land, who belonged there and knew its ways.

But this new Edith was different, beautiful in a brittle way, in the way of a woman who knows her power over men and circumstances—older, colder, prouder, shrewder.

Jim broke out of his tracks with the suddenness of a bronc hit hard with the spurs. He wheeled and strode into the street, heading toward the yonder walk and the livery stable. He started a mild stampede at the hitch rail as he rammed his way between the standing ponies; mounted men reined up sharply to keep from riding him down. He did not see them or hear their startled protests.

He passed a saddle shop, a blacksmith's, swinging by the old Spanish mission with its weathered adobe walls and crumbling arches, and was turning into the livery stable when he saw the man on the walk not twenty feet away.

Doane Jackman had just come from the Esperanza Hotel and he saw Jim Fortune and stopped. He was tall, though not so tall as Jim. He had solid sloping shoulders, a sallow, broad-boned face, a brown close-trimmed mustache that made a straight thin line above flat lips. His eyes were an amber shade encountered in big felines, and they were feline in the hard brightness of their inscrutability.

The two men faced each other momentarily. There was a cold hostility in the way they paused and measured each other; and the crowd thinned out suddenly around them. Trouble telegraphed itself through the town. It seemed as if both men were listening.

Then Jackman turned deliberately and moved into the street. It was not a hurried movement. He paced the dust with slow strides, and he did not look at Jim again. The action was a signpost to his character. He could cover caution with a semblance of leisure, could saunter in the face of danger like a cat in its own back yard.

Jim watched him through a long, tense moment, a wildness in the corners of his

eyes. Then he went on into the stable and found Tom Hardin, the hostler, seated on a box smoking a bubbly corncob, his ruddy face aloof.

Jim said, irascibly: "Tom, get my horse."

The man rose from his stool, scooped up a lighted lantern from the floor and started back toward the rows of stalls. Over his shoulder, he said, "Gonna call it a night?" The question had a disappointed querulousness.

Jim waited, an eye on the street, and he was filled with a rage that turned the night sour for him. The wildness inside him stretched closer to the breaking point. The hostler, busy with Jim's saddle in the rear, called back, "Sheriff was lookin' for you. So was Pardee and Saltonstall."

Jim did not reply. When Hardin led his dun out to the archway he tossed the man a dollar, rose to the saddle and gigged his spurs. The horse lunged up the street and sliced through a group of incoming riders, scattering them in confusion.

Chapter II

BROKEN MEN NEED FIXIN'!

HE COVERED the twenty miles to the bench, pushing the dun without reason through the shadows along the trail. The land rose before him and the lowlands were left behind. He was in pine timber, in the silence and clear cold air of his own environment.

Near nine o'clock he came to the ranch road leading back to the Wilder place. Something here made him check the horse and then rein up. He sat a moment, listening. After a while, as the night wind stirred past his face, he caught the faint, acrid tang of burning greasewood.

Slipping from the saddle, he laid a hand on the dun's sweat-dampened neck, and then walked down the brush-choked road. His big revolver was heavy in his hand. Ahead in a clearing among pines, he saw the mud walls of the Wilder house—its shale-covered, weed-grown roof, the lifting gray side of the clapboard barn. The only sound was the rasping creak of a windmill running free.

Then he saw the yellow streak of lamplight behind a drawn window shutter. He advanced as far as the low-roofed gallery, rose to the door and bent his head, listening. There was a sound of someone moving inside, the sound of wood crackling in a stove, the clank of a stove lid.

He tapped the door with his gun barrel and stood back, the gun laid down against his leg. A boot sole scraped close by, and the door swung open with a groan of unoiled hinges. He was looking at Lafe Wilder, a big-bodied, incredibly gaunt young man whose stubbled face gave him a wild, piercing look, whose eyes seemed sunken in dark pits above taut-skinned cheekbones.

Jim shoved his gun into the holster, saying quietly, "Hello, Lafe."

The man in the doorway pulled aside, a sullen edge to his first words. "Had more privacy in prison. Come in, if yuh got to pry."

Jim entered the low-beamed kitchen, seeing its unswept floor, its piles of rubbish, smelling the dank odor of a long-closed house in summertime. "When'd you get in?" he asked, watching the other man.

Lafe shuffled toward the stove where a skillet of meat was sizzling beside a coffee pot—a round-shouldered, tall man whose black hair lay shaggy over the frayed collar of his coat. "Been out three months," he growled. "Walked three hunderd miles to git here."

Jim moved a backless chair against the wall and sat down, crossing a knee and watching a spur rowel spin to a stop. He brought out the makings. "Smoke?"

"No."

Jim shook tobacco into a paper and rolled a cigarette, lighting it, still watching Lafe's broad back, the lank angle of his bearded jaw. He felt an odd excitement, an elation not commensurate with the surroundings and the appearance of an ex-convict whose manner was both sullen and belligerent.

"Lafe," Jim said, blowing out smoke, "I'm glad you've come home."

"What for? Only thing you ever cared about 'round here was Edith. Now she's gone—God knows where."

Jim let a silence run after that glum remark. He considered how much he should tell this pathetic hulk of a man, beginning

to feel a slackening of his own tension because now there might be a chance of getting Edith back to the ranch again. He said, finally, "Anything you need? Grub? A horse?"

"I got a hoss," Lafe answered, pawing with a fork in the skillet. "Stole it a week ago up in the Calaveras."

"A bit risky, ain't it?" murmured Jim.

Lafe moved his head in a three-quarter turn and Jim saw the smoldering of rage in the dark, deep-socketed eyes. Then Lafe gave a savage excuse for a laugh, a dangerous sound. "You tryin' to git funny with me, fella?"

"What's funny about stealin' a horse?" Jim wanted to know in a tone of gravity.

Lafe turned back to his stove. "What you want with me? Why you want to keep pokin' me up?"

Jim smoked in silence for a while, then answered the question. "I want to help you, Lafe. We're neighbors and I don't give a damn about what happened. I need a hand to help me trail a string down to Fort Blaisdell next month. Pay you wages and help you clean up around here."

"I don't want no job," Lafe said sullenly. "I don't want nuthin' 'cept to be let alone!" He took a tin plate down off the stove shelf and dumped the half-burned meat into it, carrying the plate to a chair near the stove, squatting upon it and beginning to eat, using his fingers, splattering grease down the front of his dust-whitened shirt. His eyes avoided Jim's. "It's all right with me if yuh git the hell out now."

A THIN smile hardened Jim's mouth. He got up and went to the stove, lifted a pothole cover, dropped his cigarette into the fire, replaced the lid with a clatter and glanced around and down at the figure slumped on the chair.

"I saw Edith in town tonight," he said, dropping the words carefully, timing them with the slow change in the big man's expression. "She's back in the Wells—workin'."

Lafe's mouth fell open and his black eyes flicked at the speaker. The plate of meat was lowered to his knee and grease glistened in his matted beard. "Workin'? At what?" His voice sounded hoarse. "What damn' work kin a woman do?"

Jim said, quietly, not smiling, "She says she won't come home. Says she's got nothin' to come home to." He paused, then added softly, "But I think she'd come if she knowed you needed her, Lafe."

The bearded man drew a lank hand slowly across his jaw. His eyes turned dull and veiled. "I don't need her," he mumbled. "Don't need nobuddy." His gaze sharpened suddenly. "Look, are you thinkin' about me or yourself? You wanted to marry her once—"

"Sure," Jim said blandly, "I wanted to marry her. Not now, Lafe. It don't look like she's the marryin' kind."

Lafe lifted his plate and began to eat, dipping his fingers in grease, his jaws working savorlessly. His eyes again had that withdrawn, half-veiled look. Jim watched him a moment, then turned toward the door. He felt dissatisfied, disgruntled. He opened the door and looked back at the hunched figure near the stove. "Doane Jackman's in town," he said, and walked out.

Jim was not a man who let pity or remorse camp on his back trail for long before taking action. In the case of Lafe Wilder, he felt deeply sympathetic. Lafe had seemed so helpless, so weak, a man made spiritless and sullen by five years in prison. Jim knew he could not tolerate even the thought of having Lafe camped on his doorstep, in need of companionship and understanding, without some sort of action.

But the more he thought about Edith, the less uncertain he became of his feelings concerning her. She was twenty-six or -seven, old enough to make of her own life what she wanted. He had been a fool to think he could change her, could bring her back to the old life. The pattern of that life and their past relationship had been destroyed.

He worked around his ranch all the day following. Along toward sundown he saddled and cinched up, returning to the Wilder place, determined to break through the barrier of Lafe's suspicion and reserve.

He found the house closed and locked. The shutters were drawn and fastened. The weed-grown dooryard was silent. There was no smoke from the chimney,

no smell of food or cookery. There was, above all, a resonant emptiness in the sound of his knocking on the kitchen door which was at once daunting and discouraging and sepulchral.

The fool, Jim thought angrily, he's too yellow to stick it out.

In the saddle again, Jim surveyed the place, remembering how it had looked when Edith had the say about keeping the weeds down and flowers growing. The house looked desolate now, hollow, grim—like the man who had come back to it and had then gone away, an outlaw for the rest of his life.

Jim was filled with a deep and corrosive bitterness. He wanted to hit out at something, wanted to smash and bruise and maim and wreck. Anger, long dormant, thrashed through him. He turned his dun back to the main trail. He did not ride home. He pointed the horse to the southward and sent it at a long high lope toward Mission Wells.

HE CAME into town around eight o'clock, stabled his horse at Hardin's livery, and went at once to the lobby of the Esperanza Hotel. He asked to see the register, but the two pages told him nothing. If Edith was staying at the hotel, she was signed in under another name.

He went back to the gallery and took a chair against the wall, smoked a cigarette while he watched the Sunday-night crowds of pleasure-bound cowboys and ranchmen moving along the walks. It was a man's town tonight.

A half hour later Doane Jackman passed the hotel, walking with two men Jim had never seen before. Always a sharp-eyed man, Doane saw Jim seated in the shadows on the hotel porch, and murmured something to one of the men, a short dark rider. He gave Jim a straight hard stare as he passed.

Sheriff Ed Gantry knew there was trouble to come this night. Gantry was posted in the archway of the mission nearby, smoking his evening cigar. He watched Jackman and his bodyguards swing by.

When Jim Fortune rose from his chair and started along the shadowed walk, Gantry stepped out and stopped him. "Jim," he said in his affable drawl, "I missed you last night. We had a table and a poker deck waitin' in Sinful Sam's back room and you never showed up."

Fully halted, Jim showed his ruddy-faced friend a look of cranky violence. "Cut it out, Ed," he snapped. "You know why I pulled out." He paused a moment, scanning the crowd in the street around him. "Seen Edith Wilder? Got to get in touch with her."

The sheriff puffed his cigar, a big, portly man with a bronze star hanging on his shirt-front. "It's a big town, son. Mebbe she's stayin' at one of the roomin' houses on Sage—or down along River or Railroad. I ain't seen her today."

"I'll find her." Jim started on, but Gantry checked him with an outthrust hand and gently pulled him back. Rage flared in Jim's hard eyes.

"I got to warn you, Jim," said the sheriff softly. "Doane Jackman's bought the Red Diamond Dance Hall down street and that entitles him to the protection of the law. 'Course," he added, seeing the flare in Jim's eyes, "we both savvy he's a blackleg with hell in his heart, but that don't change it. Son, you better cut the wind for home and stay out of town a while."

Jim said distinctly, "Ed, I've always said Doane was in that deal that jailed Lafe Wilder, and I still say it. Besides, I don't run my boot heels over side-steppin' trouble with—"

The sheriff's expression tightened. "This is one time," he said flatly, "you'll side-step it. I ain't had a gun fight in this town in years, and you ain't goin' to bust that record on me. Not if I can help it. Jim, hand over your gun."

The tall man stared with amazement at the sheriff. "You're a helluva peace maker, Ed. And I'm no fool. You can go pound salt 'fore I let you empty my holster on me without a better reason than that!"

The sheriff let his hand fall against his side. His ruddy face and blue eyes showed something quite like sadness. "Jim, I hate to see you bang into a shootout with Jackman over a gal that's gone bad and—"

"Shut up, Ed!"

Sheriff Gantry shook his big-hatted head stubbornly, impatiently. "Doane never done nothin' to you, Jim. Let me get you two together and thresh the trouble out."

"I'll take no step toward the man. He's a crook and I'll call him that to his face."

"He's a fast man with a gun—faster then you." The sheriff realized his mistake as soon as the words were out. "Jim," he said hastily, "if you pull a gun on him in anything but self-defense, I'll have to lock you up."

"If he gets the deadwood on me first," Jim said harshly, "I'm gone."

"I've said all I'm goin' to say," the sheriff sighed. He turned away and walked on up the street, a big man with a dignity not to be denied.

JIM moved in the opposite direction, stringing along with the crowd. He came before the Red Diamond Dance Hall with is hand-painted sign over the swinging doors—OPEN UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT—and he heard the tuning of fiddles and banjos inside the big barn-like room. The place was jammed to the doors even at this early hour.

Impulse made him do a reckless thing. He turned and walked up the steps, shoving through the doors and halting in the full flare of lights and racket of a cow country honkytonk going full blast.

Inside the one big room the hardy dance-hall girls stood with their men, some with one, a few with four or five, girls with hard, painted faces and flaming short skirts. Their black stockings and tight bodices were designed to turn men reckless with their eyes—and with their pokes. They hadn't failed yet.

Jim saw the confusion and turned toward the long bar, elbowing himself a place and calling for whiskey. One of four bartenders served him with the detached manner. Jim took another look around the thronged hall, a hand cupped around the squat glass, his eyes squinting through the smoke and shifting haze.

He saw Edith. She was standing at a table at the far end of the room, near a platform where four sallow-faced foreign-looking men tuned musical instruments.

He had seen her so often in his imagination that at first he thought his eyes and mind were playing tricks on him. She was wearing a light-blue frock, not as short as the other girls', but cut in a daring low V, her arms bare to the shoulder, gleaming warm, her hair in high-piled curls almost red-gold against the creaminess of her complexion.

A blond man in a dark suit and white shirt sat at the table, grinning up and talking to her. As Jim stared blankly, she turned away from this man and started across the dance floor toward the bar.

For one second Jim felt nothing but a stunned disbelief. Then blood came pounding into his temples and he left the bar and walked toward her as the music started and a wave of laughter and hand-clapping swept the room. Dancers moved out and blocked his way as the musicians went into a quadrille.

He rammed his way through these couples, shoved one man who tried to stop him, his gaze always on Edith who had not seen him and was moving slowly through the crowd. Jim veered that way.

He reached her at the end of that determined surge across the floor, and he closed his hand around her wrist, saying, "Edith!"

"Jim!" Halted by his grip, she turned white to the lips, startled by his voice, frightened by his look.

"Come outside," he said in a hard-breathing way that was louder than a whisper. "I want to talk."

She shook her head, wide-eyed, alarmed. "I can't, Jim. I work here."

"For Doane Jackman?" His voice hit her like a blow.

"Please, Jim! Everybody's staring at us!"

He took away his hand and it had left the mark of his fingers on her flesh. He said, very close: "Come out of here or I'll drag you out!"

She looked as though she wanted to strike him. She kept staring, and her mouth twisted, and her teeth held her lower lip and turned it white. She glanced toward the side of the hall. "Out there," she said as quietly as she could. "That door."

But he did not move. Her bosom lifted sharply with anger, then she whipped around and walked ahead of him, skirting the dancers, straight-backed, proud, her hands clenched beside her.

THEN they faced each other outside the door, in an alley, faint light from the street funneling through the darkness

to show the dead whiteness of her cheeks, the hard-bitten fury in his slitted eyes.

He took time to get himself in hand, then let her have it without warning. "Lafe's back. I saw him—talked to him last night."

He saw her tremble and sway against the wall. Her face was in shadow. Her voice came low and broken, like a sob. "Oh, why did he—what made him come back after what happened?"

He didn't give her time to recover from her shock. "I went back to the ranch this afternoon. He'd pulled out. If anything happens it'll be more your fault than his."

She turned sharply, and her expression had changed. It was cold and relentless—not a look to be seen by any man on the face of the woman he wanted.

"Why should I care what happens?" Even her voice was touched by the cold fire in her eyes. "I told you I never wanted to see him again. I meant it."

He kept staring at the pale oval of her face in the shadows, at the glint her eyes made, at the curl of her mouth, at the swift rise and fall of her bosom. His hand came up in a quick bend of the elbow, but she never flinched. He let his arm go slack, and his voice was dead and flat and he said, "He's got a hold on you and I'll break it. I don't care what you've done—I'll kill him anyway."

That broke her poise, and a gasp tore up in her throat. "Jim," she said after a moment, "Doane wants to marry me. I left five years ago, thinking I'd never see him again. He followed me and hung around. He never touched me, Jim. He's just waited and now he pays me like all the other girls."

"You'll be well out of that!" he snarled.

Her hand flew out and gripped his arm. Terror spoke in her voice. "His men will get you. Oh, Jim, I'm afraid of him! That's why I asked you to forget me and stay away. It's been terrible—all these years. Leaving in the middle of the night and then meeting him in another town, smiling, quiet, waiting—always there waiting and smiling—"

She was leaning against the wall, hands before her eyes, bare shoulders trembling with helpless weeping. It had a harsh, dry sound and it tormented him more than anything he had ever heard.

The crack of a revolver breached the night, its flat report echoing out over the roofs of the town and on into the hills, fading back to silence. The girl's sobbing stopped; her hands came down.

Jim was looking up the alley, toward the street, knowing the shot had come from somewhere near the dance hall, wondering who had gotten it this time.

Chapter III

EVERY MAN DIES—SOMEHOW!

HE WAS running toward the glow of the street lights, his boots kicking over the alley's packed earth, hearing other boots on the walks yonder, hearing the lift of voices above the stiff-legged hammering of those boots.

A crowd had clustered down the street in front of Hardin's Livery Stable. The shouting had quit when he turned the corner of the dance hall, and now, as he came against the back edge of the crowd, silence seemed to clap a lid upon the town.

Jim thrust men aside and crowded through to the center of the group. A man lay against the shadowed ruts of the street—a big-framed man who kept trying to rise on an elbow, but kept falling back, groaning softly. Jim saw the stubble-bearded face, the wide-staring dark eyes. Lafe Wilder. Beside the wounded man lay a revolver, half covered by dried mud.

Jim stood over the man, his face contorted. Lafe gave up and lay still on his back, his groaning stopped, his eyes bitterly bright. "Jim," he gasped. "He got me in the back!"

Jim saw the cool dull cloud coming into Lafe's eyes; he knew Lafe was going out fast. The thought was hard to take. He dropped on one knee and laid an arm on Lafe's chest, the hand gripping his gaunt shoulder with a steady pressure. "Doane?" Jim whispered. No one in the crowd heard that muttered question and no one heard Lafe's slow-breathed answer: "Doane."

"He was in that deal with you?" Jim's murmur reached the dying man's ears. "You kept your mouth shut and they put you away. You figured he'd stand by you when you got out. But he let you down."

Lafe stared at him, as if from a great distance, a small grimace of pain twitch-

ing his beard-rimmed mouth. "I—had money comin'—he tol' me—to go to—hell! One of his boys—got me in the back when—I tried throw down—on him!"

"I'll square you, Lafe." Jim's grip tightened, his mouth drew long, the lips pulled in at the corners. "Don't worry, pard."

Lafe was barely breathing. "Jim, I've rode many a trail never rode this 'un—"

"Keep goin'," Jim whispered, "straight at the sun. A plain trail. You can't go wrong."

"Sure enough," Lafe said, and died.

Jim stared for a long moment. The crowd pressed around him, and he heard someone say, "Who done it?"

"Sid Aker—Doane's man," a voice replied. "He'll run till he falls off the end of the world."

"He better," the first voice said emphatically.

Jim got up and went through the crowd; he didn't see anyone in it. A voice at his elbow said, "Sheriff's gone for a ride. The show is yours, Jim Fortune." It was the voice of Hardin, the hostler.

"Thanks," Jim said.

He walked toward the lights in the dance hall. Another crowd stood on the gallery—men with long, serious faces, the dance hall girls with lips as red as blood, holding silk scarves about bare shoulders, shivering with excitement and cold.

He stood still on the walk, his head lifted and turning, a calmness like peace on his sun-burned, lank-jawed face. "Take care," a man on the gallery hoarsely warned. "Doane's behind you in the town."

Slowly, Jim turned on his heels, and he unbuttoned his coat and let the skirt fall back behind the ivory handle of his holstered gun. He stood that way for half a minute, as if listening, then he started across the street, melting into the black shadows of the false fronts and arcades of Sunday-shuttered stores.

He paused a moment, his glance laid on the nooks and crannies of the town. Across the street they watched and listened and Lafe's still body was a lumpish shape on the ruts. A man was coming toward Jim, not hurrying. Jim waited, tense, his night eyes keening the shadows. The man passed through a band of light shining from a saloon. It was Pardee, the town's hay and feed man, a friend of Jim's. Pardee came on, his footfalls thudding gently along the walk.

Drifting up, this man passed Jim, murmuring, "He's down by the meat market. One man with him. Take care."

Jim moved on beneath the arcades. Ahead, a hundred feet, the glow of a cigarette made a red spot against the blackness. It pulsed a moment, then arcked into the street like a falling star. A burst of sparks showed the cigarette's strike.

THE MUSIC in the Red Diamond started up, but the crowd still stood under the dance hall's porch roof and was strung out along the opposite sidewalk, men and women held by the age-old thrill of blood and violence. Faces turned slowly, keeping pace with Jim Fortune's slow advance along the street.

Pausing, he drew close to the walls of the building nearest him. His hand fell swiftly and it came up with the shine of metal and a following click that was the hammer of a gun set at full cock. Silence thickened through the town, a silence so complete that the small creak of belt leather was like a shout. Jim moved again, putting his boots down carefully as he walked.

He skirted the buildings whose black shadows lay half way out in the street on his right. A door opened behind him. He swung sharply, shoulders cupped forward. But a soft voice warned, "He jest went down the meat market alley. The other one's out of it. He's gone for his horse on Railroad Street."

Jim turned again, fully alert, and he was thinking swiftly, strongly, reasoning what Doane Jackman's strategy might be, what he would do if he were in Doane's boots. He made his decision, wheeled and cut down the nearest alleyway.

This was like something long foreshadowed, long awaited, and at last arrived. It was a pattern traced in hate and suspicion and treachery. It seemed to Jim as he moved into the rear yards of the town that this meeting by night had been set centuries past, that this was a well-marked path he walked, a path marked down by fate in the dark before the earth was born.

He stood behind the rear wall of a store, scanning the yards that ran haphazardly away into the blackness that was touched by the first faint moonlight even as he stared and listened.

Then he heard a boot-toe strike something solid. A smothered oath came instantly, then more silence. Jim drew a breath and said in a loud, clear voice, "All right, Doane," and started toward the sound of Jackman's body scraping a fence.

Moving lightly, swiftly, Jim followed the fence line which was a man-high partition of loose boards running twenty feet to the edge of the prairie. Sheds and barns made an up-and-down streak of shadow ahead of him. He reached the end of the fence and slid around it, his gun at level with his right hip, his trigger finger crooked and ready.

He heard Doane's boots go thrashing through a pile of broken bottles and boards, on his left, along the line of sheds. He swung that way.

He came to the first shed, paused, his head swinging, his eyes covering the yard in which he stood—a pile of lumber, a heap of rotting waste.

There was the sound of someone breathing in the shed, a soft, rasping sound like small grunting. The door of the shed was open. Inside was blackness and one high square of light which was moonlight in a single window. As he stared, a movement disturbed the outline of that window's shape—Jim saw the contour of a man's profile beneath the shadow.

At the same instant a gun crashed behind Jim. He saw the orange flash out of the edge of his eyes. The bullet slugged the shed wall and he felt the breath of it. Hipping around, he let one shot go.

He waited a second and fired again, the reports smashing through the silence like thunder claps. Instantly afterward, a dark shape stood clear of the pile of lumber. A man—Doane Jackman's bodyguard—made a half turn. Then he fell, knees bending, and struck full length.

Jim rushed the shed's door, ducking through it, pulling aside. Doane fired simultaneously and advertised his position. He had crowded back into a corner and the flare of his gun showed like a burst of silver sparks with a crimson core.

JIM had that brief glimpse of his target and needed no more. He raised his arm and started firing.

He waited, breathing but shallowly, and then he walked toward Doane Jackman's corner. Light filtered through the window and reflected on a pale blur that was Doane's upturned face. He lay motionless, on his back, his knees drawn up, like a tired man sunk down to sleep.

Not quite sure, Jim bent and touched the man. He felt the soft deadness of the body.

Moving back to the street, he tasted sweat in his dry mouth, and he knew a deep and thorough revulsion.

Tom Hardin, the hostler, left the staring crowd and came toward him. There was fright on his face and in his wildly anxious stare. "Jim," he stammered, "you finished it?"

"It's done," Jim murmured, pushing through the crowd and moving on to the dance hall.

A sigh went up from the people on the walks. "Hell," somebody said, "now ain't that fine?" A hundred voices started babbling after that.

Jim went in the swinging doors, walked through the empty hall and came before Edith Wilder who sat motionless at a table, a shawl gathered over her head and about her shoulders, hands clasped in her lap. She did not speak but he saw the look of unutterable relief on her tear-streaked face.

She rose to her feet as he halted and said, "Get your luggage, Edie. We'll go home now."

She seemed to hold her breath. He saw her lips tremble and her shoulders rise and straighten. "Jim," she breathed, "don't say anything—don't do anything you don't mean. I—can't go through that again."

His voice came steady; the hard line of his mouth relaxed. "Edie," he said, "there's nothin' standin' between us now—nothin' except the things you remember against me. We'll be married at the mission within an hour, unless—"

She came to him silently, her hands held out to him, her eyes bright with close-held tears. "It's all I want, all I've prayed for all these years. Jim, it's been so long."

"Too long," he said, and held her close.

THE END

TEXANS DON'T NEED NO LAW!

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

To Sheriff Garret Buell, "Quarantine" meant: "Keep them tick-chewed Texas longhorns out!" But to hard-eyed Lee Shaddock, it meant: "Shove them dogies through—and grease their trail with blood and lead!"

AT NINE o'clock that morning Garret Buell saw the first of the Texas cowmen ride into town. A tall man whose shape was sharply angled by the heavy bones of his body, Buell stood in the doorway of the Traveler's House, with the match flame held against the tip of his cigar.

From force of long habit, he followed the rider with his eyes, studying and measuring the cowman's potentialities and storing the information in that part of his mind where he kept such details. A man who wore a badge, as Buell did, could never know too much about those he had to deal with.

At Buell's side, Lee Shaddock spoke in his idle drawl. "Now there's a starchy customer. He'd ride into hell and spit in the devil's eye, if he once took the notion."

"You play too damned rough for me, Buell. I don't like it!"

Garret Buell nodded. That was how he had the cowman figured. The man was short, riding with his square body bent forward, as though it was his nature to shoulder roughly through any and all opposition. He had a tight, blocky jaw and quick-moving eyes that examined the town and passed critical judgment with heady arrogance.

"Texas man," Lee Shaddock said.

Buell smiled. "You should recognize what is also in you."

Lee Shaddock's grin was loose and easy, laced with the same bold recklessness that was in his cool gray eyes.

"You'll learn about Texas from that fellow, Garret. He's tough, and there will be more like him coming in when their herds hit your fence. Ramming your cow quarantine down their throats won't be easy. Texans are hard to handle."

Buell said nothing, watching the cowman and wondering how this trouble would end. He would have felt better if he was sure about Lee Shaddock, but there was too much sand in Lee and too little solid rock.

The rider surveyed the town's hotels with his quick sharp eyes, made his decision, and swung his mount abruptly to the hitch rail that fronted the Traveler's House. He dismounted, tied the reins, and made his way around the end of the rail. He had a way of planting his weight solidly on the ground, like a man who put his bone and muscle into everything he did. He tramped across the plank walk and up the steps, halted in the doorway and slapped dust from his coat and pants.

His sharp bold glance struck Buell with an impact that Buell felt and registered with a stirring of displeasure. The man's eyes dropped to the badge pinned on Buell's vest, paused there speculatively. Then he nodded curtly, and strode on into the hotel. Lee Shaddock laughed in his softly-rash way.

Buell turned with the slow bone-and-muscle movement. He watched the cowman tramp across the hotel lobby and come up against the desk. The man's voice had been made to fit him—short, blunt, and definite.

"I am Frank Rusk, from Uvalde, Texas. I will want a room for myself and for my daughter. Three days will complete my business here. Then I leave."

Lee Shaddock nudged Buell's arm. "See what I mean? He's that sure of himself. That's a Texas man for you."

Buell watched the cowman register his name in the book, hearing the hard scratching of the pen through the room's musty silence. Then the man raised his eyes.

"I have business with a cattle buyer named Hugh Templer. Where will I find him?"

An uncertain frown grooved the dark clerk's forehead. "At the stock yards, probably. But if you have Texas cattle to market here, Mr. Rusk—it ain't any of my business, but the quarantine—"

"No," said Frank Rusk curtly. "It is none of your business."

HE GOT his room keys, turned toward the stairs, then wheeled abruptly and came stamping back across the lobby. He halted in the doorway, with his boots planted wide and his blocky shoulders rigidly set.

"You will be Garret Buell, I take it?"

Buell nodded. "That's right."

"My name is Rusk. I am Frank Rusk, from Uvalde, Texas."

Buell permitted himself the barest shadow of a smile. "I gathered that from your conversation with Charley Winters. I'm glad to know you, Mr. Rusk."

There was an arrogant streak in the cowman that reared up and bucked. "Do you make it a habit of listening in on other people's conversation?" he demanded.

"Only when it concerns me," Buell answered calmly, "or when I can't avoid hearing it." His cigar had gone out, and he reached for a match.

Another horseman and a buckboard drawn by a team of fine bays had pulled in at the hitch rail, and Buell understood without any great degree of interest that this woman and the horseman had followed Frank Rusk into town. But he gave them none of his attention. He got his cigar going again, and looked through the blue smoke feathers at the cowman.

He said quietly, "You were starting up to your room, Mr. Rusk. Did you come back here just to argue about what I couldn't help overhearing?"

Temper ruddied the cowman's face, and

put a heady bluntness into his tone. "I don't believe I like your attitude, sir!"

"I meant no offense," Buell murmured. He took the cigar from his mouth, touched the ash with a tentative finger, and wondered about the man and woman at the hitch rail. Rusk's wife, probably; and the rider would be the foreman of the outfit.

He said, "Was it because of the quarantine fence across Goliad canyon that you wanted to see me?"

"No, by God!" Rusk snapped. "I came here to see Hugh Templer, who contracted to buy my herd."

Buell moved his shoulders, and smiled. He said nothing more. He waited for the cowman to turn away, but the man didn't. That was how he had him figured. Frank Rusk was a man who couldn't rest until he had bucked down any and all opposition that he came up against. Rusk had ridden to town to see the cattle buyer, but he had met the county quarantine officer and he wouldn't be satisfied until he had shouldered aside the quarantine obstacle.

"Your fence doesn't mean a damn to me, Mr. Buell." He shoved his words out as he would his fists, solidly and bluntly. "There never was wire made that couldn't be cut. When I'm ready, I'll bring my herd through that canyon and no fence will stop me."

From behind Buell came the young woman's low cry. "Dad!" But that sound dropped away, and had no place in what stood between Buell and Frank Rusk.

"I'd reconsider that, if I were you, Mr. Rusk."

"You've had my warning. That fence will come down when I'm ready to move."

Buell listened politely to the cowman's brash statement, with a sheen of sharpening interest stirring his dark eyes. His smile was just a smile, nothing more.

"There's something you ought to know, Mr. Rusk. Last year this county was wide open to Texas cattle. Herds were pushed in, and they dropped ticks, and afterwards we had a siege of Texas fever that cost local stockmen a lot of money. They don't want any more of that, and I was hired to see that it doesn't happen again. We've built vats in Goliad canyon, and they will be operated at cost. You see that your cows are dipped, and you won't have any trouble doing your business in this county."

"No man tells me what to do, Mr. Buell."

"I'm telling you, Mr. Rusk."

"And you can go to hell!" the cowman flared.

Lee Shaddock grinned. "What did I tell you, Garret? Texas men are hard to handle."

The cowman flung around at Shaddock. "And just who might you be?" he demanded.

Shaddock laughed softly. "You've never heard of me, my friend. Don't let it bother you."

A sharp glint of interest knifed Rusk's stare. "Texas man, ain't you? What are you doing this far from home?"

"Working," said Lee Shaddock calmly. "Helping Buell make his quarantine law stick—for thirty bucks a month and found."

Frank Rusk spat contemptuously. "Penny ante! If you're worth anything, you're worth fifty a month and keep. That is an offer, Shaddock."

Impatience and resentment shoved its weight against Buell, but he held his silence.

LEE SHADDOCK'S grin broadened. "Divide and conquer. Hire off the opposition. Is that your ticket, Rusk?"

"I've made you a business proposition," the cowman snapped. "Consider it as such."

Lee Shaddock was interested, and he betrayed it in the rising brightness in his eyes. "I never work for any man I can't whip," he said softly.

Frank Rusk jerked his blocky shoulder. "Can you whip this man you're working for now?"

"I'm damned if I know." And Shaddock looked queerly at Buell.

Buell said gently, "Don't be a fool, Lee." He turned to the cowman. "Get away from here, Rusk."

But Frank Rusk refused to be moved. He spoke in his quick, decisive voice. "Fifty and keep, for a straight riding job. Jess Considine is my foreman, and he understands what holds his job. Take it away from him and it's all right with me. In that case, the pay jumps to seventy-five

and found. I've got a tough crew, and it takes a tough man to boss them."

There was a bright gloss of recklessness spreading across Lee Shaddock's eyes. He was not a stable man; he moved from job to job and squeezed what fun and excitement he could out of each, leaving the drudgery to the next man. But something darker than that was pulling on him now. He enjoyed a fight, and he could see trouble gathering at Buell's quarantine fence. But more than that, he valued a dollar for what it would buy—a good horse, a bottle, a woman.

His glance dried out as he looked at Garret Buell—the edged, searching glance of a man who had reached his decision and was willing to accept any trouble.

"Any hard feelings, Garret?" A soft question, laced with the barest shadow of challenge.

"No," said Buell. "Your choice, Lee."

Lee Shaddock turned to the cowman. "Where will I find this here Jess Considine?"

"Right behind you, Shaddock. He's waiting back there at the hitch rack."

Lee Shaddock turned deliberately. Shaddock was, Buell realized, a man who would always go to the extreme in everything he did. There was no middle road for him, either in the clothes he wore or the hard way he used a horse.

When he drank he had to get drunk, and when he fought he had to milk out the last drop. He was a dangerous combination, tough, reckless, self-centered. Shaddock looked across the space to the Slash R foreman with a strange glint of corrosive amusement in his gray eyes.

"How about this, Considine?"

Buell saw the girl in the buckboard fling a bitter glance to her father. "This isn't right, dad."

But Frank Rusk said nothing. Jess looked briefly at the girl, like a man who had long dreaded what had finally come to him.

"It's all right." His voice was slow, heavy. "It's how I got my job. If I ever lose it—" But he didn't finish that. He lifted his leg across the saddle and swung to the ground, a medium tall man with big bones that had solid meat on them. But he was not as young as he had once been, and he realized that. He had the bulk, but not the old sureness of thought and movement. Yet there was no hesitation in him as he stepped away from his horse and waited.

Garret Buell said sharply to Frank Rusk: "If you want to change foremen, then do it. Why make them fight like dogs in the street?"

And Lee Shaddock's thin slice of a smile bucked against him. "Keep out of this, Buell."

Why, Buell thought, he wants it this way. And suddenly he no longer had any liking for Lee Shaddock.

Shaddock's smile was bright and brittle. He went down the steps and across the board walk. He tramped out into the street with his boots kicking up small pools of dust. He kept going on until he came against the other man, and with a short contemptuous laugh he slugged out his fist. That was how he started it, without a word.

The blow slammed Jess Considine back, and ruffled his seamed face with the shock of pain. Shaddock struck again, crowding the older man implacably. Considine stumbled away, sent a wild blow at Shaddock's face, and missed. He tried desperately to brace himself, but Shaddock wouldn't let him. Shaddock kept moving against him, laughing out his soft contempt and hurting the man with hard bruising blows. Considine slipped to one knee, and as he swayed there, Shaddock's fist came down cruelly against the base of his neck.

Why, Buell thought, Lee Shaddock could be a killer! And there was shock in that realization. He had never before noticed the cruel lust in Shaddock, and now he suddenly realized that it had been there all the time behind Lee's smiling recklessness.

THE BLOW bent Jess Considine to one side, rolling him into the street's dust. The man turned over heavily, got his hands under him. He pushed his body up, and agony underlay the sweat on his face.

He wouldn't stay down. He pushed to his feet, his head cocked to one side by the cramping pain of that blow on the neck. He heaved around, trying to make a fight out of it with the unthinking stubbornness

of a man who could not believe that his time for such things had passed. His swinging fist was loose and futile, and Shaddock slid into the wide-arm blow, and drove his knuckles into the man's middle.

Considine stumbled backwards on slack legs, brought up hard against the wheel of the buckboard, and Shaddock held him pinned there, slamming out short cruel blows to the face and body.

Jean Rusk cried out bitterly, "He'll kill him. Dad, stop him!"

Still Frank Rusk refused to move. He was a man who believed in the rule of power, in the inexorable law that said it was right for the strong to take from the weak. It was how he had won his range, and it was how he held it.

There was a looseness in Jess Considine's wide-planted legs, and only the buckboard wheel propped him up. He pawed blindly at Shaddock, and then he could no longer make even that futile effort. He couldn't stop the punishment he was taking.

Shaddock's shoulders heaved, hammering his blows home ruthlessly, and then suddenly Garret Buell could stand no more of this. He went down the steps at a run, circled the hitch rail, and slammed Lee Shaddock away with the impact of his shoulder.

"You've whipped him. Do you have to kill him to be satisfied?"

Buell turned and caught Considine's shoulder, bracing the man's sagging body. He looked at the raw, bruised face, at the dull agony in the glazed eyes, and he heard the man's gagging attempts to breathe. It was hard to believe that anyone could be so thoroughly beaten in such a short space of time. But that was how Shaddock had worked, swiftly and heartlessly, with a cruel and brutal efficiency. It was a thing for Buell to remember.

The woman stepped down from the buckboard, and Buell watched her stonily, not moving a muscle. She looked at him and made a vague empty motion with her hand, and he saw what was in her face. Frank Rusk could use a man and cast him aside, but Jean Rusk was not made of the cold, unbending material that her father was. She looked at the beaten man, and her eyes were wet with pity and shame.

"Jess. Jess, I—"

Buell said softly, "I'll look after him. He'll be all right, Miss."

Then there was movement behind him, near and violent. A hand jerked him around roughly, and he got a glimpse of Lee Shaddock's face, white-pinched with anger.

"You play too rough, Buell. I don't like it."

"Keep away from me, Lee."

Shaddock's eyes were fever-bright, his temper a wild, unreasoning thing that kept driving him on. "I don't like being pushed around, Buell. I don't like it at all." He threw his hot, jeering glance toward Frank Rusk. "How about this, boss? Want me to put some Texas manners into this fellow?"

A thin sheen of sweat glossed the cowman's hard face. "Time enough later for that. Take it easy, boy."

Shaddock's smile was a thin and dangerous thing. "Why not now, boss? This fellow is big, but he can be whittled down."

Rusk shook his head, a short jerky movement. "You go out and see that the herd is bedded down for the night. We're moving in first thing tomorrow."

"Sure, sure," Shaddock said. He brought his derision back to Buell. He said nothing more. He spat into the dust and laughed in his soft, rash way.

As Shaddock swung his horse out into the street, Frank Rusk came around the rail and planted his blocky frame beside the buckboard. Satisfaction was in the hard planes of his face as he put his warning against Buell.

"You're in a mighty lonesome position now, fellow. You stay out of my way."

Buell's smile was tight and gray. "I wouldn't trade places with you, Rusk. You made a mistake here. You hired a man you can't handle. Don't you know that?"

He got no answer, and he moved his head toward Jess Considine's sagging shape. "Where does he stand with you?"

"He's done." And that was a rule out of Frank Rusk's book: with one wolf down, a new one took its place at the head of the pack. His code was a simple and remorseless thing.

Buell looked at the cowman, bitter and

pitying. "I feel sorry for you, my friend. You've used a club to get everything you have. You've beaten men down to get what you wanted. But you've lost more than you've ever won. You don't realize that, and that's why I'm sorry for you."

Frank Rusk was gone, taking his daughter with him, and Buell stood beside the buckboard, watching the returning awareness seep sluggishly into Jess Considine's eyes. Consciousness brought to the man a full understanding of what had happened. He had ruled the Slash R riders for many years, and that had been a prop for his pride. Now he had been beaten and cast aside, and the full weight of his years and the futility of his future came down on him crushingly.

"My God!" the man murmured hoarsely. "I never made a showing. I never had a chance."

Buell looked away from the hell that was in the old man's eyes. "If it's a job you'll be wanting—"

Considine's voice was wasted and haggard. "Nobody wants a horse that's used up."

"What you need is a drink."

"Sure, sure."

"When you get over your drunk," Garret Buell said softly, "come around, Considine, and we'll talk this out."

But the man was making his way blindly toward the saloon, and he never once looked back.

DAWN drove its gray wedge into the skyline, and as the minutes passed the gray was smeared over by the ruddy brush of sunrise. Buell rode past the pole fences that funneled in to the dipping vats that had been built to rid trail cattle of their fever-bearing ticks. He went through the gate in the quarantine fence, locked it carefully behind him, and rode up the gentle slope of the hill that overlooked the canyon.

He reined in there and made himself comfortable in his saddle, a big man who could drain the full measure of enjoyment out of the few idle moments given him. Ribbons of ground fog misted the lower depressions in the canyon floor, like smoke hanging in the still air above a campfire. A lark wheeled against the sky, sang its song, and circled its splash of color toward the canyon wall where the sun was bright.

Pretty, Buell thought, pretty to see and pretty to hear. Its cry had the same ethereal music as church bells heard from a great distance.

The canyon necked down at this place where the quarantine fence was built, and beyond, from where the Texas cattle would come, the walls fanned out broadly, like bare brown arms curving around the gently rolling grassland. The canyon was empty now and silent, and Buell settled himself to wait.

He built himself a cigarette, lit it, and relished the rich taste of the smoke. That was how it was with him. He would face trouble when it came, but he would never anticipate it with the dread and dark doubts that could corrupt a man's waiting. The time to fight was when the first blow was struck. Until then a man could smoke and think of the good things that had touched him and left their mark on his memory.

The lark swooped and rose again, and Buell followed it with his eyes until it vanished along the high stairway into the sky. He sat quietly in his saddle, wondering about Lee Shaddock. Until yesterday he had thought of Lee as a man whose only fault was his appetite for excitement. He hadn't realized how far Lee would go until that fight with Jess Considine.

But now Buell knew, and he didn't like it. In the few short minutes of that fight, Lee Shaddock had found his groove. He had enjoyed smashing Considine down, had enjoyed the feeling of power it gave him. Shaddock's next step would be to use his gun and kill, and he would find a dark pleasure in that, also.

Buell had seen other killers come and go, cutting their brief ruthless mark into a town. It was in Shaddock's blood to go bad, and it was only a matter of time before he would have a price on his head. Knowing that, Buell felt bitter and sad. And in him was a hatred for Frank Rusk, who had helped Shaddock to take his first step down the trail of no return.

The cattle appeared around the elbow of the canyon, a full two miles away, moving slowly like a yellow-brown shadow crashing across the range. Buell put his horse down the hill slope, riding out to meet the herd. He was a man alone, but

that was how these things always were.

A country organized and made laws, but it was always one man who had the responsibility of enforcing the will of the people—one man who rode alone, and fought alone, and sometimes died alone; one man who had deputies or did not have them, but always carried the weight of his office on his own shoulders.

The narrows were behind Buell, and where he now rode the walls bulged far apart, cupping a broad range that was gashed here and there by arroyos. The cattle came down the middle of the canyon, plodding in their unhurried witless way through the dust they raised, with their horn-heavy heads swaying to the dull rhythm of their walking.

Still half a mile away, Buell saw a rider swing in on the herd and bend it toward the east wall of the canyon. Buell frowned, and tried to find a meaning in this, but there was none. He rode steadily on, shortening the distance, and now he saw a change in the usual pattern of a cattle drive.

There were not as many riders as were normally necessary to control such a large herd. He could see only two horsemen and they were on the far side of the cattle, keeping back at a distance as the herd pointed closer to the arroyos that gouged the east side of the canyon.

BUELL'S attention drew down and tightened as he tried to understand this. Was it the purpose of those two men to hold his interest and keep the herd moving while Lee Shaddock and the rest of the Slash R crowd circled to strike Buell from behind? He turned, raked the canyon with his narrowing glance, but he saw no danger. He frowned, and an impatience to have this over with nudged him roughly.

He raised his voice and shouted across the cattle to the two horsemen. "Where is Frank Rusk?"

The two men looked at each other, and then one of them waved his hand vaguely toward the rear of the herd. "Back there."

Something was wrong. It was like a shadow rubbing out the sunlight, like a cold breeze cutting through the day's warmth. It was a thing Buell could feel but not see, sense but not understand, a voice that whispered but said nothing. His horse came against the flank of the herd, and he pulled the reins lightly, holding it in. He looked across the humped backs of the cattle at the two riders, and sent his question to them.

"Is it your intention to have these cattle dipped?"

They stared at him silently, with the lash of brittle amusement in their eyes. One of them said something in a low voice, and they looked off toward the canyon narrows. Buell threw a glance in that direction, and saw a single rider coming across the flats at a stretched-out run. Then one of the Slash R men whipped around in his saddle, facing toward the arroyo a few yards beyond him, and shouted.

"Rider coming! He looks like Considine. Hey, over there!"

A gun sounded, flat and harsh, and Buell felt the swift flurry of air beside his face. He saw smoke spurt from behind the buckbrush rimming the arroyo, and knew instantly that he had ridden into Lee Shaddock's trap.

He wheeled his horse around and jerked his gun; he pivoted his horse again and completed the circle and was again facing the startled cattle and the ambush beyond them. He saw the two riders scattering as he slammed his shot toward the arroyo. He plunged his horse against the flanks of the frightened cattle, fired at a vague movement on the rim, and fired again.

Through all this some man's thinned voice cried out: "No. For God's sake, Shaddock!"

A bullet tugged on a fold of Buell's shirt, and now he saw Lee Shaddock standing on the rim of the arroyo. There were other men rising out of the buckbrush around Shaddock, and Buell saw the startled alarm glossing their eyes as the panicked cattle stampeded toward the arroyo.

All this and what followed was a single blurred picture in Buell's mind, with only a few sharp edges to it. He saw one of the men lunge toward Shaddock, and he saw Shaddock spin and put a bullet into that man. He saw the others whirl and scatter along the arroyo, scrambling desperately as they fought to escape over the steep yonder slope.

Dust thickened and rolled up from stampeding hoofs, and through the dust Buell saw the first ranks of the cattle halt desperately and brace themselves on the rim of the arroyo, only to be plunged over the brink by the mad pressure behind them. But gradually the herd bent its course and sheered off around the arroyo, and as the dust thinned out Buell rode to the rim and was sickened by what he saw.

He looked for Lee Shaddock, but he couldn't see the man. He turned his horse and started around toward the mouth of the arroyo, and he saw Jess Considine coming toward him at an angle, riding hard.

Considine shouted and pointed, and Buell jerked around in his saddle. That was when the shot came, flat and vicious. The bullet struck Buell's right leg, plowed through and into the body of his mount. The animal wheeled and pitched wildly, and Buell struck the ground in a hard roll.

He came to his knees, and groped for the gun that had been knocked out of his hand, but he couldn't reach it. He saw Lee Shaddock crouching on the rim of the arroyo thirty yards away, and he heard Shaddock's corrosive laugh as the rifle came up.

Jess Considine's racing horse swept in then, and Considine struck the ground in front of Buell as the rifle roared. Considine fired once with the gun in his hand and then he fired again, deliberately. He waited until Lee Shaddock sank to the ground, and then he turned heavily and sat down beside Buell.

BUELL looked at the red smear spreading on the front of Considine's shirt, and his mouth was hard and bitter. "He meant that bullet for me."

Considine wagged his gray head. "No matter." He put his hand on the ground beside him, bracing his sagging body. Frank Rusk rode up then, dismounted, and stood there looking down.

Jess Considine squinted his fading eyes toward the high blue of the sky, and his voice was slow and thick.

"Nice day," he said. "A nice day for a cattle drive."

Buell said gently, "You want a cigarette, friend?"

"A mighty nice day," Considine murmured. Then his arm folded under him and lowered him slowly to the ground.

Buell turned his head and looked up at Frank Rusk with silent, bitter contempt. Rusk swung his head, looking away, and his voice came high and thin.

"I didn't know Shaddock planned this. He said he'd hide in the arroyo and stampede a few cattle back on you. That was to put you out of the way while he shoved the rest of the herd through your fence."

Buell said softly, "I pity the man who thinks he is so big that no law can hold him."

"You're shot," Rusk said. "Let me give you a hand."

"Stay away from me." Buell pushed the cowman's hand aside. "Keep away from me, Rusk."

"I was wrong about that quarantine, Buell. You don't understand how it is with me. I had to be tough when I got started. There wasn't any law then in Texas except what I made. But I'm willing now to hold to your quarantine. Whatever you say, to square this."

Buell gripped the stirrup, and pulled himself up from the ground. He stood on his good leg, breathing hard through bitter lips.

"Jess Considine was a good man. Bring him back to life, then."

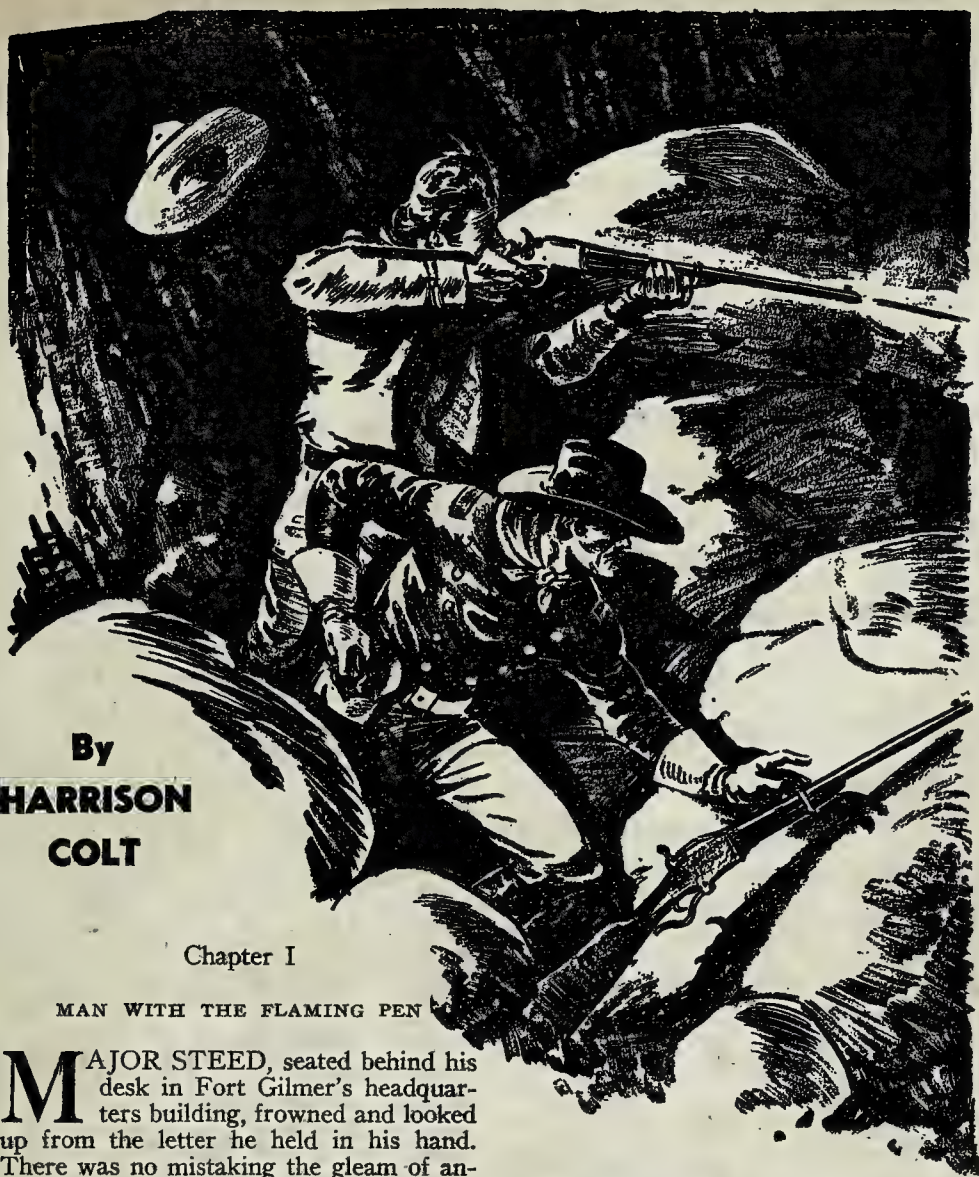
The cowman closed his eyes. "Don't hold that against me."

"I was trying to keep Lee Shaddock straight," Buell said, "but you changed that with your offer of big money. Let's see you put Lee back where he was."

The cowman raised empty eyes. "My daughter left me last night, Buell." His voice was beaten, dull. "She is staying in your town, and she doesn't want to see me again. But someday, if I show her how things are—" He raised his hand and stared at it. "Look after her for me, Buell. It's not too much to ask, is it?"

"All right," Buell said.

Buell turned his horse away. He was sick and tired. A man shaped his life toward big things but sometimes he found, as Frank Rusk had found, that his world was barren and empty. Buell swung his horse toward town, riding alone.



By
HARRISON
COLT

Chapter I

MAN WITH THE FLAMING PEN

MAJOR STEED, seated behind his desk in Fort Gilmer's headquarters building, frowned and looked up from the letter he held in his hand. There was no mistaking the gleam of annoyance that shone in his flinty blue eyes as they fastened on Mark Fleming.

"So?" he grunted. "You're an artist?"

Mark grinned. He was a big man, wide-

Glorious Saga of Frontier Troopers

WHO LEADS THE DOOMED PATROL?

They came down out of the hills screaming and yelling — and shooting. . . .

Straight toward the fiery hell of a bloody guntrap rode a doomed patrol of plains troopers, led by a trio of hate-mad men—Mark Fleming, helpless greenhorn; his hot-headed rival; and the cold-blooded commander who hoped to see them both sunbaked corpses!

shouldered, thick-necked, with a bluff, good-natured face and keen, alert brown eyes. He did not look much like the popular conception of how an artist should look. He said, "That's what I've always maintained, sir. Of course, some editors I know have been unkind enough to argue the point."

Major Steed did not smile. It was evident that Mark's attempt at humour had been wasted on the man. "In his letter General Burnside requests, as a personal favor to him, that you be shown every consideration. How well do you know the General?"

Again the quick grin came to the big man's lips. "I'm afraid I'll have to admit I've never even met the distinguished gentleman. But Quigley—he's the editor of *Parson's Monthly,* the chap who sent me out here—knows him well enough to call him by his first name and slap him on the back. At least, so I've heard."

"I see." The officer turned his annoyed gaze back to the letter before him. "What you want from me is permission to spend some time at the post. Also, to be allowed to accompany the men on patrol and escort duty into the desert. Is that correct?"

Mark nodded. "That's right, sir."

The Major was silent for a moment. Then he cleared his throat unhappily and asked, "From what the General writes, I understand you expect to find something around here worth painting?"

"Not exactly, sir. You see, I'm no painter—just an ordinary magazine illustrator that *Parson's Monthly* shipped out here to do a series on a soldier's life in a frontier army post."

Steed's features remained bleak, unsmiling. "In either case, it seems to me you're only wasting your time. You won't find anything here at Fort Gilpin but sand and rocks and heat and monotony. Take my advice, young man. Get back on tomorrow's stage and find some more likely place for your—uh—picture-making."

"I'm afraid you don't quite understand, sir. It's the life here at the post I want to catch. Men going about their everyday duties caring for the horses, drilling, escorting the stages, riding into the desert on patrol duty. All that sort of thing."

The man behind the desk stared at Mark in silence. He ran his finger along the neatly-trimmed mustache above his harsh, unfriendly mouth. Then he gave his stiff shoulders a shrug. "Very well," he said gruffly. "Since the General requests it, I'll grant permission for you to remain at the post as long as you want, and accompany the men wherever you want to."

But, despite his words, Major Steed's frown of disapproval made it clear he thought this whole affair a lot of damn foolishness, and if it had been left strictly up to his discretion, permission would have been refused.

A MINUTE later a lanky young second lieutenant, the possessor of long, tawny yellow sideburns, stepped into the room and saluted. "You sent for me, sir?"

Steed nodded and stared at the newcomer with narrowed eyes, as though he did not altogether approve of him. "I did, *Mister* Baker," he replied sharply. "This is Mr. Mark Fleming. He came all the way from New York to draw some pictures of what goes on in an army post. I want you to find suitable quarters for him and look after him while he's our guest. From now on he's your responsibility. Is that clear?"

The tawny-haired, skinny young man grinned at Mark and dropped one eyelid in a knowing wink. "I'm sure it'll be a pleasure, sir." To Mark, he said, "Come along, sir. There won't be any trouble about quarters. You can share mine."

After they had left the headquarters building and were moving across the quadrangle toward Officer's Row, Baker gave a soft chuckle and remarked, "You must have had a letter from the President, himself."

Mark gave his companion a puzzled look. "What?"

The yellow-haired man continued to chuckle. "I meant you must have had a letter from the President to wangle permission from the Old Man to stay here at the post and do your sketching."

"I did have a letter from General Burnside."

Baker gave a long-drawn whistle. "That's nearly as good. No wonder the Major gave in."

Later, when Mark had been settled in a small room adjoining Baker's on the sec-

ond floor of the unpainted frame building set aside for bachelor officers, the lanky officer said suddenly, "I suppose you're wondering about the Old Man—Major Steed, I mean?"

Mark stood beside the dresser, putting away the last of his shirts and underwear and socks. He turned, his eyes moving across the room to where Baker sprawled lazily on the bed, watching him.

"Now that you mention it, there is something that's been puzzling me. What was behind Major Steed's unfriendliness? I had the feeling he was dead set against my staying. Why?"

Baker grinned. "Major Steed is a damn good officer," he said. "One of the best in the service, in my opinion. He's efficient, brave as an Apache, cool and steady under fire. He may be something of a martinet, but at the same time he has the reputation of having the best interests of his men at heart. In short, if you searched the entire army over for the ideal officer to place in charge of Fort Gilpin, he'd be it."

Lieutenant Baker paused and a twinkle grew in his pale eyes. "Sound like a great admirer of the Old Man, don't I? Don't let it fool you. All of that can't change the fact that he's a stuffed shirt, has about as much humour as a dead mackerel, and is a down-right tyrant as far as his daughter is concerned. Furthermore, it's a well-known fact that he doesn't have much use for civilians."

Mark Fleming grinned ruefully. "That's the impression I got. And I suspect he thinks even less of civilian artists. But what's this about a daughter?"

Baker gave a loud sigh. A moody look came into his face. "Her name is Frances, and she's nicer to look at than a peach orchard in bloom. No one understands how a fire-eating old ogre like Major could possibly have a daughter like that. It doesn't make sense. But there it is, and what do you propose to do about it?"

Mark felt a touch of amusement. "You sound like you were in love with the girl."

"Heaven help me!" groaned the young man. "That's the exact truth—and it'll mean my finish if the Old Man finds out about it."

Mark stared blankly. He said, in a puzzled voice, "I'm afraid I don't see—?"

"First there was Tim Cosgrove. He was handsome and a West Pointer. Anybody would have told you he had a brilliant future ahead of him in the service. But that was before he made the mistake of falling in love with Fran.

"When the Major discovered what was going on, he sent Cosgrove out on patrol. Every time he came back to the Fort the Major sent him out on another errand. Cosgrove was kept busier than a jack-rabbit with a pack of grayhounds on his tail. After a couple of months of this he'd lost thirty pounds and he began to look like a tired old man. Then one day he disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

Baker nodded. "Went over the hill—deserted."

Mark said, "You figure all that happened just because he fell in love with Steed's daughter?"

Baker shook his head glumly. "There's no question about it. The same thing happened to a couple of other unmarried officers who began paying too much attention to Fran. One pulled strings to get himself transferred back East. The other was killed by hostiles while out on patrol.

"That's why all the unmarried officers hardly dare look at Fran. Can you imagine such a cockeyed situation? Here's the prettiest young lady in the whole Arizona Territory and all the eligible young males avoiding her like she had the small-pox!"

Mark felt a stirring of interest within him. "Steed's daughter—she's here at Fort Gilpin?"

Baker's face brightened. "She will be tomorrow. She's due back here after a visit with her aunt in St. Louis. Arrives on the morning stage from Lairdsburg."

MARK was on hand when the Lairdsburg stage pulled in next day. He crouched in the shade of an adobe stable and pretended to sketch the stage. But his eyes were on the girl who stepped down from the Concord. Even through the yellowish fog of dust that hung in the air, he could see that Baker had not lied about Fran Steed's beauty.

Her hair was quite dark, her eyes were very blue, and her skin was a golden brown from the sun. Her mouth was wide and warm and seemed made for laughter, yet held a touch of haunting mystery that

somehow reminded him of the painting of the Mona Lisa.

Major Steed and a group of older officers and their wives pressed forward, and warm greetings filled the air. Small children yelled and whooped and ran wildly in and out of the little group. The English grayhounds set up an excited barking, adding to the confusion. Mark gazed about him. Fantastic as Lieutenant Baker's story had seemed, it appeared to be the truth. Not one of the younger bachelor officers was in sight.

Mark waited until the dark-haired girl and her father had disappeared within one of the houses on Officers' Row. Then he climbed to his feet tucked his sketch-pad under his arm and moved across the parade ground. The merciless Arizona sun laid a heavy burden of heat across his shoulders and back. The faint wind that stirred across the quadrangle was oven-hot.

He stood for a moment in front of the C.O.'s quarters then for some reason he could not quite explain stepped up onto the veranda and rapped his knuckles on the door. Fran Steed opened the door to let him into the long hallway that ran the length of the building the various rooms opening out onto it.

Inside after the blinding brightness and heat it seemed dim and almost cool. The girl gave him an interested glance a friendly smile curving her lips. "You wish to see my father?"

The big man nodded. Actually, it was the girl he had wanted to see. He knew that now. But he said. "Yes. I'd like to see the Major, if he's not too busy."

Fran Steed moved to the stairway leading to the second floor. "Someone to see you, Dad," she called, and a moment later Major Steed came down the stairs.

When he saw Mark by the door, annoyance stirred in his eyes, but he said with unexpected civility, "What can I do for you, young man?" Mark sensed that it was the girl's presence that was responsible for his subdued manner.

Mark found himself saying, with a sudden flicker of inspiration, "I don't seem to have met the young lady, Major."

The grizzled, craggy-faced officer looked startled. Grudgingly, he said, "This is my daughter, Frances. Mark Fleming. Mr. Fleming's some sort of an artist. Came out here from the East to make pictures."

"How interesting!" said the girl. "Tell me, Mr. Fleming, do you make portraits?"

Mark smiled. "Not ordinarily. But in your case, I'd be delighted to have a go at it."

The girl's laugh was like the tinkle of faraway bells. "Thanks. But I wasn't thinking of myself. I was wondering—"

Major Steed broke in impatiently. "My dear, you and Mr. Fleming can talk some other time. Mind stepping in here, Fleming?"

He led the way into the parlor, motioned Mark to a seat on the worn, plum-colored horse-hair sofa. Then he turned, and his hard blue eyes swung probingly at the artist. "Now, why did you come here? Isn't Mr. Baker looking after you properly?"

Mark said quickly, "It's not that, sir. The Lieutenant has treated me handsomely. I've no complaints on that score."

"Well then?"

"It's just that I'd like to get out with the men on one of their scouting patrols. Find out what their camps look like, get the feel of the desert, see the way it looks at night. Maybe get a look at some of these Apaches I've heard so much about."

Major Steed frowned. "No need to come to me for that. All that was necessary was that you should have informed Baker what you wanted. Anyhow, I'm sending him out tomorrow to meet the supply wagons from Fort Crook, escort them in. There's no reason you shouldn't accompany him."

"Thanks, Major." Mark stood up. "I'm sorry to have troubled you."

The officer gave a noncommittal grunt. "I'll show you to the door," he said, and moved with Mark into the hall.

At the door, the big man paused. "You have a very pretty daughter, Major," he remarked. "It's a wonder to me a girl who looks like that is still single, especially with all these young men around."

A brickish glow seeped up under the Major's sun-reddened face. His blue eyes held a frosty anger. "Nonsense!" he snapped. "She's just a child! It'll be time enough for her to think of getting married five years from now. Good-day, sir!"

The door slammed loudly, and Mark moved down the porch steps, a faint grin on his blunt features. The rest of the day he spent moving about in the stables, the log barracks of the men, the suttler's store. He busied himself roughing in the salient features of each spot. Yet his thoughts, filled with an eager impatience, were on the morrow.

Chapter II

FIVE DEAD FIGHTERS

THE line of troopers stood by their mounts in the half-grayness that preceded the dawn. There was no sound but the restless stirring of the horses, an occasional smothered yawn from one of the men. Lieutenant Baker called briskly, "Prepare to mount! Mount!"

Saddle leather creaked as the platoon came up into their saddles. Mark Fleming hoisted himself onto the back of a larger bay, held for him by a stable sergeant. His senses were sharply aware of the sights and sounds and smells about him, his mind already busily composing the scene as he would draw it later. The dusky line of horsemen in the foreground, vague, almost shapeless in the half-light, the huddle of dark buildings at the edge of the parade, except where blurs of lamplight marked the mess-hall and the stables.

But his thoughts were broken in upon by the pound of a horse's hoofs, swelling out of the darkness. The sentry's sharp challenge and the murmur of voices came faintly from the direction of the gate. Mark thought he detected a note of urgency in the voices. A vague excitement moved him.

Then a horseman came into sight, galloping quickly across the parade. Before Major Steed's quarters, the trooper flung himself down, pounded loudly on the door with his fist. Almost instantly lights flared within the house and a moment later the man was admitted.

An officer hurried up from the gate. As he moved past, Baker called. "What's up, O'Neill?"

" 'Paches have busted loose again, Hank! They caught up with the Lairdsburg stage, killed four men and a woman, carried off two small children. Now they're attacking the supply wagons coming up from Fort Crook."

Lieutenant Baker dismounted. "Maybe this means a change in the Old Man's plans," he said. "I'll go with you."

Mark watched the two men hasten away in the direction of the C.O.'s quarters. As he sat his horse, he heard the low voices of the troopers. Once or twice he caught mention of the name 'Nana,' guessed that it must be the name of the leader of the Apache raiders.

A few minutes later, Baker hurried back to the waiting, restless line of shadowy, blue-clad horsemen. He halted before Mark Fleming. "Afraid I've got bad news for you, Mark. The Major's decided you are to remain here at the post. This is likely to turn into a hot and heavy business before we're through."

Mark stared at him for a moment in stunned silence. Then, anger thickening his voice, he growled, "But damn it all, Hank! This is what I came out here hoping to get a look at —the frontier army in action. Surely Steed knows that?"

Baker shrugged bony shoulders. "Sorry. But those are my orders. Nothing I can do about it."

Mark jumped down from his horse and started for the commanding officer's quarters, walking fast. Behind him he could hear Baker's voice barking curt commands. Then came the jingle of accouterments, the sound of horses moving into a double column. Another sharp command, and the platoon started to move off.

Mark almost ran the last few yards to the veranda steps. An orderly admitted Mark into the long hall. O'Neill and the recently arrived courier—a dusty, grimy-faced cavalryman—stood talking together at the foot of the stairs. ONeill glanced up, asked, "Anything I can do for you, Mr. Fleming?"

Mark nodded grimly. "I'd like to see the Major."

BUT the Post Commandant had gone up to his room to dress, and some minutes passed before he returned downstairs. There was a further delay while he conferred with O'Neill and the trooper behind closed doors. After the two men had left, Steed stepped into the hall, gave

Mark a cool glance, said tersely, "I can give you half a minute, Fleming. Come in here."

He led the way into a small room containing a desk, several chairs, and a bookcase filled with worn volumes. He dropped into the swivel chair and swung around. "Well?"

Mark found it difficult to keep the anger from his voice. "Major, you gave Lieutenant Baker orders that I wasn't to go with him. And yet only yesterday you said—"

Major Steed's gruff voice cut in sharply. "Mr. Fleming, what I may or may not have said yesterday does not apply at the moment. A great many things have happened since then. For one thing, Nana and his Chiricahuas have broken loose. There would be considerable danger involved in permitting you to ride with Lieutenant Baker and his escort detail. I cannot assume the responsibility of having you killed or captured by Apaches."

Mark said earnestly, "Major, I came out here hoping to get an idea of what men and officers stationed at a post in Indian country were up against. Of course, I had no idea anything like this was going to happen. But now that it has, I don't want to miss it. I want a chance to ride with the men. As far as I'm concerned, this is the chance of a lifetime!"

Steed shook his head impatiently. "I'm afraid that's impossible. As I said before, I can't assume responsibility for your safety."

"Even if I were to sign a statement that the responsibility was entirely mine? That I was aware of the risks involved?"

The officer said, curtly, "Not even then."

For a moment Mark eyed the older man in silence. "Major," he said bitterly, "I don't think your concern for my safety is the real reason for your refusal. There's something else behind it."

Major Steed stiffened in his chair. His hard blue eyes held sharp glints of anger. "All right," he burst out suddenly, "if you want the truth, I'll give it to you. Here at Fort Gilpin, I have only three companies. Yet with this meager force I'm expected to protect dozens of outlying ranches from Indian attack, keep open the supply lines and means of travel, track down and bring in hostiles who have gone on the warpath. To accomplish these tasks I need every last man assigned to my command. I can't spare any of them to play nursemaid to you or any other damn civilian!"

Mark felt the warmth come up into his face. "I assure you, Major, I can take care of myself. I can ride, handle a rifle with fair skill, and I'm not exactly the helpless weakling you seem to think."

Major Steed stirred impatiently in his chair, the frown deepening on his harsh features. "Mr. Fleming, I see no advantage in prolonging this discussion further," he said curtly. "If you choose to remain at the post and continue your—ah—sketching foolishness, I shall offer no objection. But, under the present unsettled conditions, anything else is completely out of the question. Now, sir, I beg to be excused. There are more pressing matters demanding my attention."

Major Steed turned to his desk and began to shuffle the papers lying before him.

Mark stood for a moment staring at the man's stiff, uncompromising back. Then he turned and strode angrily from the room. Mark Fleming was ordinarily a patient, long-suffering man. But now, the manner of his curt dismissal and the faintly veiled contempt in the older man's tone, filled him with rage and resentment.

From what Steed had said, it was plain that he would like nothing better than to see Mark Fleming leave the post at the earliest possible opportunity. But this made the big man grimly determined not to give the other that satisfaction, although at the moment he felt like throwing up his hands and doing just that.

LIEUTENANT Baker and his platoon of troopers rode wearily back to the Fort just a little before sundown. The faces of the men, under their masks of alkali and sweat, were grim. With them, in the single wagon of the outfit not destroyed by fire, they brought the bodies of five dead teamsters.

It wasn't until the next day that Mark had a chance to tell the lanky, yellow-haired lieutenant what had happened during his interview with Major Steed. The two men sat in the meager shade of the

veranda before their bachelor quarters, squinting across the parade, deserted under the blaze of the mid-afternoon sun.

"So unless Steed can be persuaded to see things differently," Mark concluded, "I guess I'd be wasting my time staying on at the post any longer."

Baker shook his head soberly. "I don't like to be a wet blanket," he said, "but I do know Major Steed. Once he makes up his mind, nothing but an act of Congress could induce him to change it."

After that, a gloomy silence fell between the two men. Idly, Mark watched a middle-aged officer advance across the sun-baked quadrangle. He was carrying two Spencer carbines and a pair of ammunition belts. An orderly leading two saddled horses was close behind him. The officer went up the steps of the Post Commandant's quarters, disappeared within.

After a minute or so, he came out. Mark sat up straighter. Frances Steed was with him. They moved down the steps, mounted, and moved off toward the gate.

Mark frowned. "That seems like a damn fool thing to do," he remarked.

Baker yawned lazily. "What does?"

"Riding out from the Fort when the Apaches are kicking up trouble."

"Oh, they're not going far. Just down by the creek for a little target practice. Fran likes to keep her hand in."

Mark nodded. He remembered reading somewhere that the wives and daughters of army men were taught to handle firearms. "I suppose that officer with her is a married man?"

"Captain Carpenter?" The lanky lieutenant grinned. "Very much so. He's Steed's adjutant, and there are five little Carpenters at home."

The big artist climbed to his feet and Baker gave him a surprised look. "Where you going?"

"I'd like to find out how good a shot the Major's daughter is. I might even make a sketch or two. Coming?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "And take a chance on the Old Man finding out about it? No thanks. He can make life tough enough for a second lieutenant as it it. I shudder to think what might happen if he ever found out the way I feel about Fran!"

Mark grinned a little. "Well, at least that's one thing I don't have to worry about. He can't very well make things any tougher for me than he already has."

Chapter III

MANHUNT IN THE MAZITALS

SKETCHBOOK under his arm, the big man left the post, plodded past the suttler's store and the stage station, and continued on toward the narrow trickle of water known as Cactus Creek.

Here, where a few sparse cottonwoods lifted their stunted limbs, he saw the two horses tied. A burst of carbine fire came from over a slight rise. When he crossed it he saw the girl, a cavalry rifle at her shoulder, firing at a four-inch bull's-eye tacked to a wizened tree trunk about seventy-five paces away. Captain Carpenter stood beside her, one hand on his hip, the other gripping the barrel of his own Spencer.

After the girl had finished firing a round of shots from her carbine, she turned and caught sight of Mark. She smiled and said quickly, "Why, Mr. Fleming—how nice! Captain Carpenter and I are having a little shooting match. Would you care to join the contest?"

Mark hesitated. "Well, I really came out here to do a little sketching—"

Captain Carpenter spoke up. "Aren't you forgetting, my dear, that Mr. Fleming is from the East? He's not likely to know much about guns." His dark eyes, under bushy, gray brows, held little friendliness as he regarded the big man. "Tell me, Fleming, have you ever fired one of these?" He indicated the cavalry carbine in his hand.

Mark shook his head. "Never."

"That's what I thought," announced the stocky officer. He turned to the girl. "So you see, my dear, it would hardly be fair to Mr. Fleming to ask him to compete against—well, against experienced marksmen."

"Just the same," decided Mark, "I think I'll accept your invitation after all."

Fran smiled, her deep blue eyes dancing. "Good!"

Mark stood by while Carpenter fired seven shots at the target, then walked toward the tree to inspect it. He came

back, a smug smile on his lips. "We're tied, Frances. One miss apiece." He looked over at Mark, grinning faintly. "But no doubt Mr. Fleming will have little trouble bettering that."

Mark accepted the loaded rifle, hefting it carefully, trying to get the feel of the weapon. Then he brought it to his shoulder, squinted carefully along the short barrel, pulled the trigger. The bull's-eye jumped slightly, under the impact of the bullet. He kept firing until all seven shots were expended.

The girl gave a little exclamation of wonder and hurried toward the tree. A moment later, she swung around, called excitedly, "Seven bull's-eyes! Where on earth did you learn to shoot like that, Mr. Fleming?"

Captain Carpenter's ruddy face had turned a beet color under his tan. "I thought you said you'd never fired a rifle?" he accused angrily.

"I'm sorry if you misunderstood me, Captain. You asked me if I'd ever fired a cavalry carbine, and I said no. I didn't mean I'd never fired a rifle."

The stocky officer made no reply, but anger shone from his eyes, lay in the sullen lines at the corners of his mouth.

Twice more, the girl and the two men emptied their rifles at the mark nailed to the tree. When they had finished, the girl said, smiling, "If you ever decide to give up art, Mr. Fleming, the U. S. Army could use you. Up until today the Captain and I had considered ourselves pretty fair shots. Now we know what real shooting is, don't we, Captain?"

Carpenter cleared his throat unhappily. He said, "Of course, my dear, you must realize there's a difference between accuracy on the rifle range and accuracy in actual combat. As a matter of fact, some men who are invincible on a target range can't seem to hit anything under the stress and strain of battle. Not," he ammended hastily, seeing the look on the girl's face, "that I mean to imply that would happen to Mr. Fleming."

After another half hour, they returned to the post. Mark walked beside the slow-moving horses, engaging the girl in a lively conversation. He discovered that Fran Steed, unlike her father, had a delicious sense of humor and laughed as easily as her mouth had indicated she would. Carpenter rode beside the girl, hardly saying a word, his features set in paunchy lines of disapproval and annoyance.

AS THEY came opposite the Steed house, the girl quickly jumped down. She turned to Mark and held out her hand. "It's been a lot of fun, Mr. Fleming. Maybe you'd care to join us again tomorrow?"

Mark said, "I'd like to see anybody keep me away." His gaze, fastened on the girl's face, was frankly admiring, and a touch of crimson came into the girl's cheeks under her golden tan.

Carpenter cleared his throat loudly. He said, "Unfortunately, my dear, I'm afraid we'll have to call off our plans for tomorrow. Some matters have come up that'll make it impossible for me to get away."

Mark Fleming said quickly, "Sorry to hear that, Captain. But it won't be necessary for Miss Steed to change her plans. I'll be happy to accompany her—if that's all right with her?"

Fran smiled, darting a quick glance at the flustered, unhappy face of her father's adjutant. "It's wonderfully kind of you, Mr. Fleming. And it solves our little problem, doesn't it, Captain Carpenter? Father always insists that I shouldn't step outside the post without someone along."

Carpenter had the look of a man whose strategy had back-fired upon him disastrously. He made an attempt to rectify his blunder. "Well, come to think of it, maybe I can put those other things aside. They aren't so important that I—"

An imp of mischief danced in the girl's eyes. "We couldn't consider it, Captain. No, you mustn't neglect your post business for such a trifling matter. Besides, now that Mr. Fleming has agreed to take your place, there's no problem anyway."

The stricken officer opened his mouth to say something, then decided against it. He clamped his mouth shut and swung his horse toward the stables, leading the girl's mount.

Mark watched him ride out of sight. There was a grin on his lips as he turned back to the girl. "Want to know something? I don't think the Captain likes me."

Fran Steed laughed. "I suspect you're

right. In many ways, Captain Carpenter is just like Dad. Neither of them think that anyone out of uniform can really be a man."

"Is that what you think, too?"

She smiled. "Are you trying to make me disloyal to the Army? I prefer not to answer that."

She turned toward the veranda steps and he watched her disappear into the house. Then, as he turned to walk away, he nearly collided with a man moving in the direction of the porch. It was Major Steed. There was a startled, angry look on the Post Commander's features. He brought up sharply, waited for Mark to step out of his way, then moved past him up the steps without a word. But he paused for a moment on the veranda, glancing down at the big man, a faint glimmer of concern lurking far back in his harsh blue eyes. Then his boots made angry sounds on the planks as he strode forward and flung into his quarters.

Mark Fleming shrugged his wide shoulders. It was evident that the Major had seen him and the girl together. It was also evident that the Major had not liked what he had seen. A faint amusement grew within the big man. Like it or not, there wasn't much the Major could do about it. He couldn't send him off on scout patrol or escort duty to keep him away from the girl, as he had done the others. Maybe— Mark came to a sudden halt. When he started to walk towards his quarters again, his eyes were narrowed in thought.

NEXT day, down by the creek, Mark and the girl blazed away with carbines for half an hour. Afterwards, as they rested in the sparse shade of a few mesquites, the artist produced paper and pencil and fell to making a sketch of the girl. A few minutes later he handed her the rough sketch.

She exclaimed in surprise. "Why— why it's a perfectly amazing likeness!"

He made a pained grimace, although his brown eyes twinkled. "You needn't act so surprised. After all, I did graduate from the Yale Art School. And magazines have actually been known to pay me hard cash for my drawings."

"I didn't mean that, silly. I only meant that you did it so swiftly. I thought it took much longer to make a portrait sketch."

"It does. Tell you what. Agree to pose for me every afternoon and I'll try to work up something worth-while. Is it a deal?"

She smiled. "Only on one condition. That you allow me to pay you for it."

He protested, the girl remained firm. Finally, he nodded. "Very well. I'll set a price when it's finished."

"Oh, yes," said the girl. "Just one thing more. I think it'd be ever so much nicer if no one knew about this until it was finished. I'd like to surprise Dad with it."

Mark congratulated himself. This would fit in neatly with his own plans. "I think that can be arranged. We'll meet down here by the creek every afternoon as though for target practice, find some shady spot and get down to work."

It was five days later that Lieutenant Baker, a slight frown on his lean features, demanded of Mark, "What's going on between you and Fran Steed? You haven't gone and fallen love with her?"

"Aren't you jumping to conclusions?"

"Maybe. But you two seem to be spending a lot of time together."

Mark smiled a little. "You've noticed that?"

"Noticed it! The whole post has noticed it. Did you think you could escort the C.O.'s daughter to the rifle range every afternoon without starting the rumors flying? Besides, what else could hold you here at the post? You admit you've sketched everything worth sketching around here. And the Old Man has flatly refused your request to do any actual campaigning with the men. Yet you're remaining on. There must be some reason."

"There is a reason. I still haven't given up hope of making Steed change his mind."

Baker stared in astonishment. "Damn it, man! You don't expect to do it by making him think you're in love with his daughter, do you?"

Mark said, with a quiet grin, "Maybe I do."

The lanky man swore softly. There was a disgusted, half-pitying look in his eyes as they studied Mark. "I gave you credit for more sense. Don't you see what you've

done? Steed hates anyone he suspects of even looking at his daughter. Now, it will give him a special delight to turn down your request."

"That's one way of looking at it," Mark admitted.

BAKER frowned impatiently. "What other way is there?"

"Well," Mark said slowly, "I don't like to be put in the position of lecturing an officer of the U.S. Army on strategy, but I've worked out quite a different answer."

"Go on."

"In the past, Steed has succeeded in breaking up any romances he thought might be developing by sending the man away from the fort on some errand, keeping him away from the fort and the girl as much as possible. But in my case, since I'm a civilian, not a subordinate officer, those methods are useless. That's why I believe that, sooner or later, the Major will realize there's only one way he can get me away from the fort and his girl."

"What's that?"

"By granting my request."

The lanky lieutenant regarded the big man in an awed silence. Then, suddenly, he began to chuckle. "Jumpin' Judas!" he exclaimed finally. "You may be right, at that."

Mark encountered Major Steed several times in the next few days. The officer looked worried, harassed, and his glance met Mark's with a poorly-concealed venom and bitterness. But Mark recognized that he had other matters besides his daughter's affections to trouble him. News had reached the Fort that Apache raiders were leaving a trail of fire and blood throughout southeastern Arizona.

Scouting details traced careful patterns across the cholla and saguaro-studded deserts. But Nana and his warriors, with what seemed devil-inspired cunning, eluded their pursuers, striking swiftly and without warning, then taking refuge in grim, rock-rimmed mountains to the north.

A tenseness gripped the post. Rumors of impending action flew thick and fast. Then, one morning shortly after stable call, Major Steed sent for Mark Fleming. As he followed the headquarters orderly toward the C.O.'s office, Mark found that the palms of his hands were damp with nervous perspiration. There was a curious hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The stony-faced Major looked up from his desk as Mark stepped into the room. His eyes were bleak and hard, and he sat stiffly erect in his chair. When he spoke, his voice was flat, devoid of any discernable emotion.

"You are still desirous of accompanying a detail assigned to actual campaigning against the hostiles?" he asked bluntly.

Mark replied, "I'd like nothing better, sir."

Major Steed ran his finger along the neatly-trimmed, graying mustache that adorned his upper lip and scowled unhappily. "In that case," he announced stiffly, "you'll be pleased to know I've reconsidered the matter."

Mark tried to keep the eagerness out of his voice. "You mean you've changed your mind?"

Steed brushed aside the question. "Some time today, two troops of cavalry under my command will take the field in an effort to locate Nana and his band of Apaches. I shall raise no objection if you desire to ride with us."

Mark Fleming found it hard to conceal his elation. He thanked the officer, walked quickly back to the unmarried officers' quarters. Lieutenant Baker, seated on the edge of his cot, looked up from the Colt he was cleaning.

"There's a pretty definite rumor floating around that we're moving against the Apaches," he informed Mark eagerly. "They say the Old Man is taking over himself. That this time we'll stick on Nana's trail clean to the San Mazitals if necessary!"

"I know," said Mark. "And it's more than a rumor. I've just been talking to the Major."

Baker stared up at the big man. "Does that mean—?"

Mark nodded. "I'm going with you this time," he said.

Chapter IV

GUN-MISSION TO APACHE HELL

O'NEILL and his San Carlos scouts moved far ahead of the advancing column. Mark Fleming, riding with

Major Steed and the small group of officers immediately behind the advance guard, could mark their progress by the distant clouds of alkali dust that lifted thinly against the cloudless sky, and streamed off into the distance.

For two days now, under the searing blaze of the merciless Arizona sun, the two companies of cavalry had been moving toward the bluish-violet peaks jutting sharply and raggedly against the horizon, advancing across a flat wasteland of sand and cactus and bright-blooming desert flowers.

Mark sought to ease his weight in the saddle and a faint flicker of pain crossed his face. He found it impossible to discover a section of his anatomy that was not already rubbed raw by the constant jogging of the hard leather under him.

"How do you like chasing Apaches?"

Mark turned to find Lieutenant Baker, having come up alongside, grinning at him slyly.

"It's mighty hard on a body," Mark admitted. "And so far I haven't seen anything but dust and heat. What makes you think there's an Apache within fifty miles of here?"

"I don't know whether there is or not," replied the lanky man cheerfully. "But I'm fairly certain the Old Man isn't out here just to enjoy the scenery. He sent Whiskey Dan and a couple of Indian scouts out to try to pick up Nana's trail the day after I brought those dead teamsters back to the Fort. My hunch is that Corbin sent back word that he had done just that, and that's why we find ourselves where we are right now."

"Even if we pick up Nana's trail, is there any reason to think we'll be able to catch up with him?"

Baker shrugged his shoulders. "Up to now, all the Apache war chiefs have operated on the same theory. Strike in swift, sudden raids from mountain bases, avoid encounters with large forces of the enemy, keep constantly on the move. Then head back to the mountains and wait for a chance to do the whole thing over again. I doubt whether Nana intends to vary the pattern set by his predecesors. And there's one flaw in that plan of campaign."

"Yes? What's that?"

"Sooner or later they'll get somebody on their trail who won't give up in the foothills. Who'll follow them right up into their own mountains, force them to fight or surrender. And I got a notion—"

Lieutenant Baker's voice halted abruptly, and a faint excitement came into his face. He was staring off into the distance. Mark followed his gaze and saw a buckskin-clad rider loping swiftly across the plain in the direction of the column of troopers.

The lanky man said, almost jubilantly, "What did I tell you? Here comes Whiskey Dan Corbin now!"

Major Steed lifted his white-gloved hand and the blue column jingled to a halt. A moment later, the grizzled scout rode up. There was a wide grin of satisfaction on his leathery, white-whiskered countenence.

"Yuh didn't lose much time gettin' here, did yuh, Major?" he chuckled. "Well, we guessed right. Nana's headin' for Victorio's old hideout up in the San Mazitals. There ain't a bit of doubt in my mind."

"Good!" Major Steed smoothed the line of graying mustache on his upper lip thoughtfully. "How much of a start has he got on us?"

"Not more than a half-day's march, Major."

Steed said, "This time I think Nana will have cause to regret not remaining peaceably on the reservation."

As the afternoon wore on, the land over which they rode was undergoing a change. Now they were coming to the foothills of the San Mazital range, and the desert had been replaced by a broken, many-ridged terrain of naked rock, deeply chiseled canyons, and dark slopes of mountain pine.

THEY made camp that night in a canyon whose walls rose sheer and stark on either side. After supper, despite his weariness, Mark made some sketches of the camp. Also, he drew a number of quick memory sketches of some of the scenes of the day's march, to be worked up later in more detail.

Whiskey Dan Corbin wandered over from a nearby campfire and stood watching him for a while. "Dawgone, young feller," he commented. "Shore wish I could do that. Damn if I ain't seen some

sights that'd make your hair stand on end. But half the time, folks don't believe me when I tell it. If I could now git it down on paper like that, wouldn't nobody dare say I was stretchin' the truth, even a mite."

Mark lifted his eyes, interested. "What kind of sights?"

"All kinds." The army scout motioned with his arm. "I seed some places in these very mountains, you kin hardly believe they'd look like that, even yore eyes a-starin' straight at 'em. Colors so bright they set yore eyes a-blinkin'. Rocks that look like the devil hisself has carved 'em out.

"Oh, I seed a lot o' things. Some of 'em not exactly pretty. I remember comin' acrost some poor devils that was taken alive by 'Paches. Some of 'em had been left hangin' head-down over slow fires. Others was tied to cactus with green raw-hide strips. Yuh kin figger what happened when the sun made them strips tighten up."

Mark asked curiously, "Ever see this Nana we're chasing?"

"Shore. Seed him plenty on the reservation. Ugly devil. Hates all white men wuss'n sin. Not that I blame him exactly."

"Why'd you say that?" asked Blake. "I don't see how he has any reason to hate whites. Didn't they set aside a place for him to live, supply him with food, clothing, entirely free? What's he got to kick about?"

Corbin grinned a little. "Mebbe so. But ain't yuh fergittin' that once all this country was his? As fer food and clothin', that was hardly any problem as long as deer and wild turkey and quail were thick around here. Before the bangin' rifles of the whites scared them away. But there's somethin' else, too. Nana's folks, his mother, wife, four children were all killed by a party of drunken prospectors. That's somethin' no man, white or red, will ever fergit."

At dawn they moved ahead again. They were following a trail now that led through deep and winding canyons, between precipitous, towering walls of rock, across wide arroyo-gashed mesas, a trail where it often became necessary to dismount and lead the horses forward in single file.

The noon halt was made beside a swift mountain stream that splashed among giant boulders. They were about to resume the march when the Apache messenger was brought into camp, surrounded by O'Neill and three of his Tonto scouts.

Major Steed rose to his feet and turned his sharp blue eyes on the scout commander. "You've taken a prisoner, O'Neill?"

Lieutenant O'Neill shook his head. "We found him waiting in the trail, sir. He made no effort to escape. Claims Nana sent him. Says he has a message for you, sir."

The Major frowned slightly. "Very well, O'Neill. Tell him to deliver his message."

The interpreter spoke to Nana's messenger, then swung around. "He says Nana does not wish to fight with soldiers of the Great White Father in Washington. Nana wants to meet the soldiers and talk. He and his warriors have had nothing to eat for many suns. They are hungry."

"Ask him if he is willing to surrender."

Again a flurry of Apache words. The interpreter translated, "He says Nana might surrender and return to the reservation if he knew that the White Father would not punish him and if food and blankets were given him and his band."

Major Steed asked, "Where does he wish to meet me?"

It was brought out that Nana had set Tombstone Canyon as the meeting place, that he would bring with him only a few of his head men, that he expected the whites to do likewise. The time was to be an hour before sundown.

Major Steed was silent for a moment, stroking the bristly under edge of his mustache. Then he said, in quick decision, "Tell Nana I will meet him as requested."

Mark fancied he saw a gleam of disapproval in Corbin's eyes, but the veteran scout said nothing. Steed designated Lieutenants Baker and Warren to accompany him. Lieutenant O'Neill would be left in command of the detachment during his absence. To Corbin he said, "You know where this Tombstone Canyon is?"

The scout nodded. "Reckon I kin find it fer yuh, Major."

Mark moved forward to the Major's side. "Please, sir," he said, "I'd like very much to accompany you."

Steed gave him a quick, half-startled look. He said, "For all I know, Mr. Fleming, this may be a trap. There's a chance none of us may get back alive."

"I realize that, sir. And I'm willing to take my chances along with the rest of you. After all, you said back at the Fort that I would be free to ride with you wherever you went."

An annoyed frown shaped itself on the officer's face. "But I didn't mean—" He broke off sharply, gave a disgusted shrug of the shoulders. "Very well, Mr. Fleming. Come along if you must."

Chapter V

PISTOL POWWOW IN TOMBSTONE CANYON

CORBIN, leading the way along the rocky trail that hugged the side of a towering cliff of odd-colored reddish rock, pulled his horse to a halt. He slipped his rifle from the saddle boot and inspected it carefully.

"What is it, Corbin?" demanded Major Steed.

"Jest makin' sure my gun is ready fer business, Major. Tombstone Canyon is jest around that bend in the trail."

Steed regarded him grimly for a moment. "You think this is some kind of an Apache trick?"

The scout lifted his buckskin-clad shoulders in a careless shrug. "Don't know, Major. It's jest that I don't trust Nana. He hates whites wuss'n poison. There's some Apaches that are good, and some that are bad. But I figger he's the orneriest devil of all."

Major Steed glanced back at Mark Fleming and frowned. Mark sensed that the man was wishing he had not given in to the artist's request to accompany the party. "I didn't realize you had such a dubious view of the matter," he said, his tone sharp with asperity. "You might have mentioned it sooner."

"You didn't ast me." Whiskey Dan Corbin leaned forward in his saddle and aimed a dab of brown juice at a small boulder beside the trail.

Steed gave the scout an angry glance, but made no reply. A moment later they were moving forward again. Shortly they swung around the bend of the trail and caught a glimpse of the canyon opening out before them. Whoever had named the canyon, Mark decided, had named it well.

Huge flat rocks, some as high as forty or fifty feet, rose out of the floor of the valley. Smaller rocks, of every shape and color, were spilled about. The high flat canyon walls had long since shut away the light of the sun, leaving a deep mantle of dark shadow over the entire valley floor.

Corbin said, "They're waitin' fer us, Major," and pointed toward a white feather of smoke lifting lazily between the towering rock walls. It came from a cluster of huge rocks half-way down the canyon.

Half an hour later, the party rode up to the place where Nana and a half dozen of his sub-chiefs waited. The Apaches, swathed in blankets, squatted like so many stone images around the council fire. Only their salty black eyes seemed alive in their impassive countenences.

Dismounting, the Major and his party took their places on the opposite side of the fire. Mark had no trouble picking out Nana from his followers. He was a big man, his long black hair held back from his face by the band of red flannel tied around his broad forehead. His fierce, snaky-black eyes peered out from his wide-boned, powerful face, deep hatred lurking in their depths.

When they were seated he started to speak, talking loudly and in an angry voice. Corbin acted as interpreter. "He says yuh have not brought the food or blankets yuh promised to bring."

Major Steed said, "Tell him, I made no promise to bring food or blankets. I promised only to meet him for a big talk and smoke. Tell him that if he agrees to surrender and return to San Carlos he shall have both food and blankets."

The Apache chief listened to Corbin with flashing eyes. He spoke again his ones aggrieved. Corbin said, "He says he does not trust yuh. He things mebbe yuh will punish him and his people fer leavin' the reservation."

"Tell him that he will be punished only if it is proved that he has done wrong. I can only promise that if he surrenders to us now, he will receive justice. Otherwise, we shall be forced to hunt him down and

bring him back home to the reservation."

Mark saw the hatred blaze in the old chief's eyes as these words were translated into Apache. He stared at his blanket-swathed companions, and to the artist it seemed that wordlessly they had arrived at an understanding.

THERE was a little silence after that. Then one of the subchiefs pushed forward a basket of Sonora tobacco and sheets of cigarette paper. Major Steed reached for some of the brittle tobacco leaves, rolled them between his palms to crush them into small particles, tore off a strip of paper, and fashioned a cigarette. The other white men followed his example. Mark spilled most of his tobacco, but managed to put together a crude imitation.

The basket lay before Nana now. He reached for the dried brown leaves, quickly and expertly made his cigarette. Mark noticed suddenly that the Indian beside Nana was watching the chief intently, and at the same time shifting his gaze occasionally to Major Steed. It was almost as though he awaited some signal.

Mark, studying the Apache with a sharpened interest, became aware of a slow, stealthy movement under the blanket draping his shoulders. The big man felt a sudden queasiness in his stomach. The blood began to quicken in his veins as a sudden conviction seized him.

Mark tensed, watched as Nana leaned forward to light his cigarette. A moment would tell if his hunch had been wrong. Nana leaned back, took a puff, and the dark-skinned warrior next to him lifted a rifle from the concealment of his blanket. With a quick motion he threw it up, aiming at Major Steed.

Mark lunged at the rifle barrel, whipped it into the air just as the Indian pulled the trigger. Instantly, shots and fierce yells rang out. Mark felt the whine of lead past his ear, heard the sound of bullets smacking into boulders, caroming away crazily. The sudden tumult awakened echoes in the deep-walled canyon.

The dark-skinned Apache turned hate-filled eyes on Mark. He dropped the rifle and snatched swiftly for the knife in his belt. Mark retained his grip on the rifle, swung it like a club. The sound made by the gun barrel as it thudded against the Indian's head was not pleasant. He fell back and lay still, his head twisted on his shoulders.

Mark looked around to see Corbin and one of the copper-skinned men rolling furiously on the ground. The Apache had the old scout down and his knife was inches from the white man's throat. Mark threw a brawny arm about the Indian's neck and dragged him off. Corbin was swearing softly to himself. He staggered upright, pulled his Colt and laid it viciously across the warrior's skull. The man went limp, and Mark let him sprawl on his face.

Corbin grunted, "Thanks, friend. A minute more an' that damn varmint woulda made wolf-meat outa me!"

By now the fight seemed to be over. Four of the Apaches lay dead or dying, and the rest were in swift retreat. The whites had suffered one casualty. Lieutenant Warren was stretched on the ground, Baker kneeling anxiously beside him.

Major Steed, smoking revolver in hand, was carefully and coolly aiming and firing at the retreating enemy. He glanced around, saw Mark and the scout, and called, "We've got to get out of here quick! Nana's warriors were behind the rocks at the far end of the canyon. They're coming now!"

Mark raised his eyes in the direction Steed had indicated. He could see wiry, copper-hued horsemen pouring down across the valley. His heart sank.

Baker and the old scout hurriedly carried the wounded Warren to his horse, lifted him into his saddle. Then both mounted, riding close to give him support. They moved off down the trail. Major Steed swung around to face Mark, said brusquely, "This is no time to dawdle, Mr. Fleming. Mount and get the hell out of here."

Mark took another look at the horde of yelling riders bearing down on them, and decided that for once the Major's advice was excellent. He swung onto the bay's wide back and spurred after the others.

He had ridden only a short distance when he became aware that the Major was not following him. He glanced back. Major Steed had led his horse behind one

of the large boulders at the side of the trail and was dragging his Spencer from its boot. Even as Mark watched the man threw up the rifle, took careful aim, and pulled the rtigger. A red horseman far up the canyon threw up his arms and tumbled from his pony.

MARK swung his horse around and galloped back. Reaching the officer's side he jumped down and lifted his own carbine from the saddle.

Major Steed looked around impatiently. "I thought I told you to ride out of here."

Mark said, "I remembered I had a carbine, too. Besides, it just occurred to me that they won't be able to ride very fast with Warren wounded."

Major Steed's rifle cracked again, this time without effect. Standing beside him, Mark fired three quick shots, and two dappled Indian ponies were suddenly riderless.

Major Steed blinked in surprise. "Where'd you learn to shoot like that?" he asked curiously.

Mark grinned. "Your daughter taught me."

The pound of unshod hoofs was swelling into a thunderous sound between the high walls of rock as naked riders swept forward at a wild gallop. The Apache yell rang sharp and blood-chilling through the narrow canyon. The horsemen were close enough now so that Mark could make out their fierce, paint-smeared faces.

Lead snarled viciously past the two men, screamed hotly off the boulders that sheltered them. The Apaches, leaning far to one side of their racing ponies, were discharging their guns under the necks of their wiry mounts.

Mark cast a quick glance at the officer beside him. Major Steed's face was calm and undisturbed even though it must have been apparent to him that it was only a matter of minutes before the swift-moving avalanche of warriors would sweep over them. Despite his dislike for the man, Mark was forced to a grudging admiration for his lack of nerves, his iron self-control.

Both men had reloaded now, were pouring a withering fire into the front rank of the oncoming savages. Mark felt the barrel of his carbine grow hot with the rapidity of fire, as he pumped shot after shot at the Apache hords.

Major Steed threw down his empty rifle, pulled out his Army Colt, and continued to take careful aim as he coolly went on firing.

A horse screamed and went down. Two more brown bodies toppled from their mounts. Then a third warrior slid to the ground. There was a momentary confusion in Apache ranks. Riders in the lead were pulling up, riders at the rear tried to gallop ahead. Ponies milled in a confused tangle.

"Looks like we stopped them, Major," Mark exulted. "They seem to have lost their stomach for the fight."

Major Steed was frowning, squinting thoughtfully at the halted Apaches. "I don't think it's that," he said. "But it does give us a chance to get out of here. Come on!"

The two men quickly moved to the waiting horses, mounted, and spurred toward the canyon entrance. Ahead they could see the other three riders moving out of the valley. A moment later, they had disappeared from sight.

Mark glanced over his shoulder several times and his astonishment grew. "What do you make of it, Major? I expected them to be after us harder than ever. But they still seem to be milling around back there."

"I think they've come across Nana's body. In that case, I don't think we need fear any further pursuit."

"I didn't know he was among the Indian dead."

"I wasn't sure either—until now. When he saw that his plan had gone wrong, he darted away to save himself. I emptied my gun after him, but at the time I didn't know whether I had done more than merely wound him."

THE parley party rode back into camp some hours later. Next morning the blue column pressed forward swiftly. It only lacked an hour of noon when the troopers filed through the narrow pass and emerged into Tombstone Canyon. There they found five aged squaws awaiting them. Corbin questioned them, then swung around, a smile on his face.

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"Major, they're offerin' to surrender an' this time I reckon they damn well mean it. These squaws say that Nana was a bad man, that he allus stirred trouble between whites and Indian. They say he promised 'em many things, none o' which he gave 'em, an' got the young braves drunk on rotgut to git 'em to take to the warpath. They say they are hungry an' cold an' want to get back San Carlos."

"Ask them about Nana."

The scout spoke rapidly in the Apache tongue, listened to the answers, then translated. "I reckon there's no doubt about it. Nana's dead, an' so are most o' the others who counseled war with the white man. What d'yuh want me to tell 'em? What terms o' surrender?"

Major Steed outlined terms quickly. The Apaches were to surrender themselves and their arms before sundown at the canyon. Blankets and food would be provided and they would be escorted back to the reservation.

Throughout the afternoon the Apaches straggled in. By sundown Steed was satisfied that almost all of the renegades had given themselves up. Next morning O'Neill and one company was detached to escort them back to the Indian Agency at San Carlos. Major Steed and the second company headed toward the Fort.

As he rode beside Lieutenant Baker, Mark experienced a warm glow of achievement at the thought of the well-filled pages of his sketch-pad. He knew that Quigley and the readers of *Parson's Monthly* would be delighted at the sketches at the sharp reality produced by first-hand observation. And in the back of his mind, Mark was comfortably aware, he carried enough precious subjects for illustrations to keep him busy for the next year.

But somehow these things didn't seem so important any more. Mark found his thoughts going back to Fran Steed, recalling the deep blue of her eyes, the warmth of her wide, well-shaped mouth, the dark silkiness of her hair.

He kept remembering his last glimpse of her. She had been standing by the gate, waving farewell to the departing column as it had ridden out of the fort, a slender, charming figure in white, a small white parasol over one shoulder.

Baker's voice cut sharply through his thoughts. "You'll be leaving the post soon?"

Mark gave a little start, let his gaze shift to the lanky man riding at his side. After a moment he said, "You know, Hank, I seem to have become rather fond of the place. I may stick around a while longer."

"Oh?" For a moment or two Baker was silent. Then he asked, with a narrowed glance at the artist, "You sure it's the place you've become fond of? It couldn't be—some person?"

Mark shrugged. "What's the use denying it? I may as well admit the truth. I've gone and fallen for the Major's daughter. What do you think of that?"

Lieutenant Baker chuckled. "I was wondering when you'd wake up!"

"Then you're not sore at me for—"

"For stealing my girl?" Baker laughed. "No. Not really. You see, I knew I never had a chance with Fran anyway. She never even knew I was around. But when I saw the way she looked at you the other day when we rode out of the post, I suspected that the Major might be in for an uncomfortable time."

Mark frowned. "You think Steed will refuse to give his consent? Even if Fran is willing?"

"If you got any idea that just because you knocked that rifle up in the air and saved his life, the Major is likely to change his tune, you better get it out of your head right away."

A shadow darkened Mark Fleming's features. "Then you don't think my chances of leading Fran down the aisle are any too good?"

Baker chuckled. "I didn't say that. After all, the girl is of age. And she's in love with you. And another thing. She's pretty fond of the Major and when she finds out how you saved him from becoming the victim of Apache treachery, well—" He dropped one eyelid in a meaningful wink.

Mark rode on, in a pleasant, rosy haze of anticipation. After a while he said, "Hank, how'd you like to be best man?"

"Like to be?" said the lanky officer. "Hell, I am—even if she couldn't see it."

THE END

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(Continued from page 83)

I kept watching the nearest hill like I could pull it to us just by looking.

Then, when it had moved behind us, I'd pick the next one. I looked back once and saw Jim had his eyes open and he was watching me. Gosh! that helped considerable, though his face was a funny gray and that pink stain was back on his lips. The Currycomb man just sat, his eyes pinched closed, his lips twisted.

I grinned at Jim and faced the road again, still trying to pull those hills back of us, still trying to count how many miles was left before we'd reach help. All of a sudden Jim spoke.

"Buck!" It sounded funny and it made me turn cold all over. I just dropped the reins and swung over the seat, dropping beside him. The horses kept on ambling.

Jim's fingers moved funny, aimless, like he didn't know what he was touching. His eyes were closed but they opened when I called his name, choked up. The Currycomb man watched us. I saw Jim's eyes were glassy and I couldn't be sure he saw me.

"Buck?" His voice was a whisper, raspy and wheezy. "I'm not—going to make it. I got to tell you—I was going to—throw in with Miller after what—Don and Pearl said. Miller thought I come to tally for Don and he—was suspicious, and I didn't have a chance—to talk when you rode in."

He stopped and I just stared at him, my heart dropping like a rock clean down into the pit of my stomach. Then Jim seemed a little stronger.

"You scared Miller, and he thought I aimed to draw on him. I didn't until—I thought him and them gunwolves would—cut you down. Buck, I couldn't—" He stopped again for a long, long minute and then his fingers closed tight around my wrist.

"Remember me, like old times, five years ago? I want it like that. . . ."

HIS hand fell from my wrist and his head rolled to one side. I didn't have to be told he was gone—it was something I just knew. Without thinking, I picked up his hat and put it over his face and then I climbed back on the seat. I just sat

there, not touching the reins, letting the horses move on slow.

I was aching miserable clean through. Even to the last Jim Corrigan hadn't been the man he once was, the Jim I'd set up real high in my mind. He'd taken the last step to throw in with a side-winder like Miller against all of us that'd once been his friends. I wanted to cry and I kept swallowing, but the lump wouldn't stay down.

What could I tell Sis, or Don or Paw? If I told 'em the whole story, then there just wouldn't be anything at all left of Jim Corrigan. They'd all hate him and they'd say his name like it made a bad taste in their mouths. I couldn't do it.

Then I began to see how maybe I could sort of put Jim back in his right place, so that all the things he'd done himself wouldn't really matter. Maybe I could sort of look up to his memory once time had gone by and all this wasn't so close. I reined in the horses and swung around in the seat.

"If you git out here," I told the Currycomb man, "you could be far away when they start to look for you."

He stared at me. "But I ain't able to walk none."

"You can walk or wait until the Double Bar O hands string you up."

He blinked and then he pulled himself over the edge of the wagon. He struck off from the road and I sat and watched him disappear over a ridge. He wouldn't stay in the country none and he was the only one besides me that'd heard what Jim had said.

I spoke quiet to the horses. My eyes got misty and I rubbed 'em clear. I knew what I had to tell Pearl and the rest. They'd give Jim a real funeral and have Phin Bledsoe say some mighty nice things about him. That's the way it would be.

Jim and me would never have that ranch together. But inside of me, in a funny way that I couldn't make out none, I knew that Jim was my partner for good and all. A man can ruin himself, I guess, really not meaning to, but nothing can change the picture of him in the heart of a friend.

I spoke clear and firm to the horses. Maybe I growed up then, I don't know. But I felt like a man for the first time.

THE END

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(Continued from page 67)

Tucker mounted, rode over to his office. Ma Baker had said nothing about Johnny having a carpet bag of money.

He opened his office door and a voice said quietly, "Sam."

It was his wife. Sam said, "What are you doing here?"

"Bringing this, Sam." She thrust something toward him in the darkness. It felt like a carpet bag. Sam lighted a lantern. It was a carpet bag. It was full of money. Sam counted it. It was all there.

He looked up at his wife. She brushed her eyes with the back of her hand. "I did the milking, Sam. When I came back in the house it was almost dark. I found this carpet bag in the front room. Most anybody could have slipped in and left it there."

"Yeah," Sam said, "most anybody."

"But we know who put it there, don't we, Sam?"

He didn't reply. He was opening a desk drawer. He got a handful of old papers, crossed to the pot-bellied stove, and started a paper fire.

"Sam," his wife said, " a fire in this weather?"

Sam apparently was so deeply in thought that he didn't hear her. He looked at the motto a better sheriff than he'd ever be had tacked, years ago, on the office wall.

"The law is for cure rather than punishment, with prevention preferable to cure."

Sam turned back to his stove. In his hand was a yellowed wanted dodger: ". . . often called Deadwood. Deadly with a gun. About five foot ten, thin, sandy hair, brown eyes, has a habit of carving small figures out of wood. Wanted for . . ." Sam tossed the dodger in the fire, watched its edges char.

Then he looked at the fantastic little figurine he held in his other hand, a little carving he'd just taken from his desk drawer. It was the carving of a steer standing spraddle-legged, head down, horns at a warning angle. It was a nice piece of work, and Sam Tucker hated to part with it. He let it slip out of his fingers into the fire.

There was no longer a person called Deadwood, only a man known as John MaGee.

THE END

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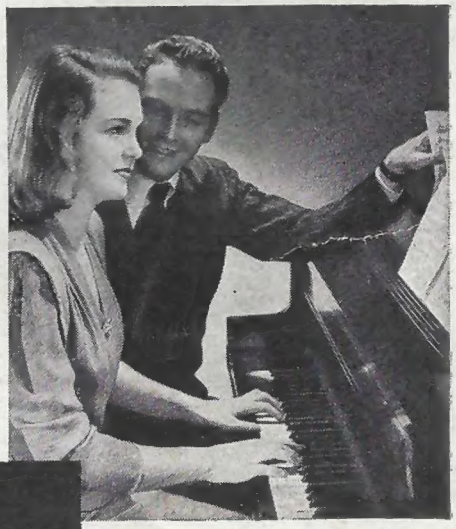

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